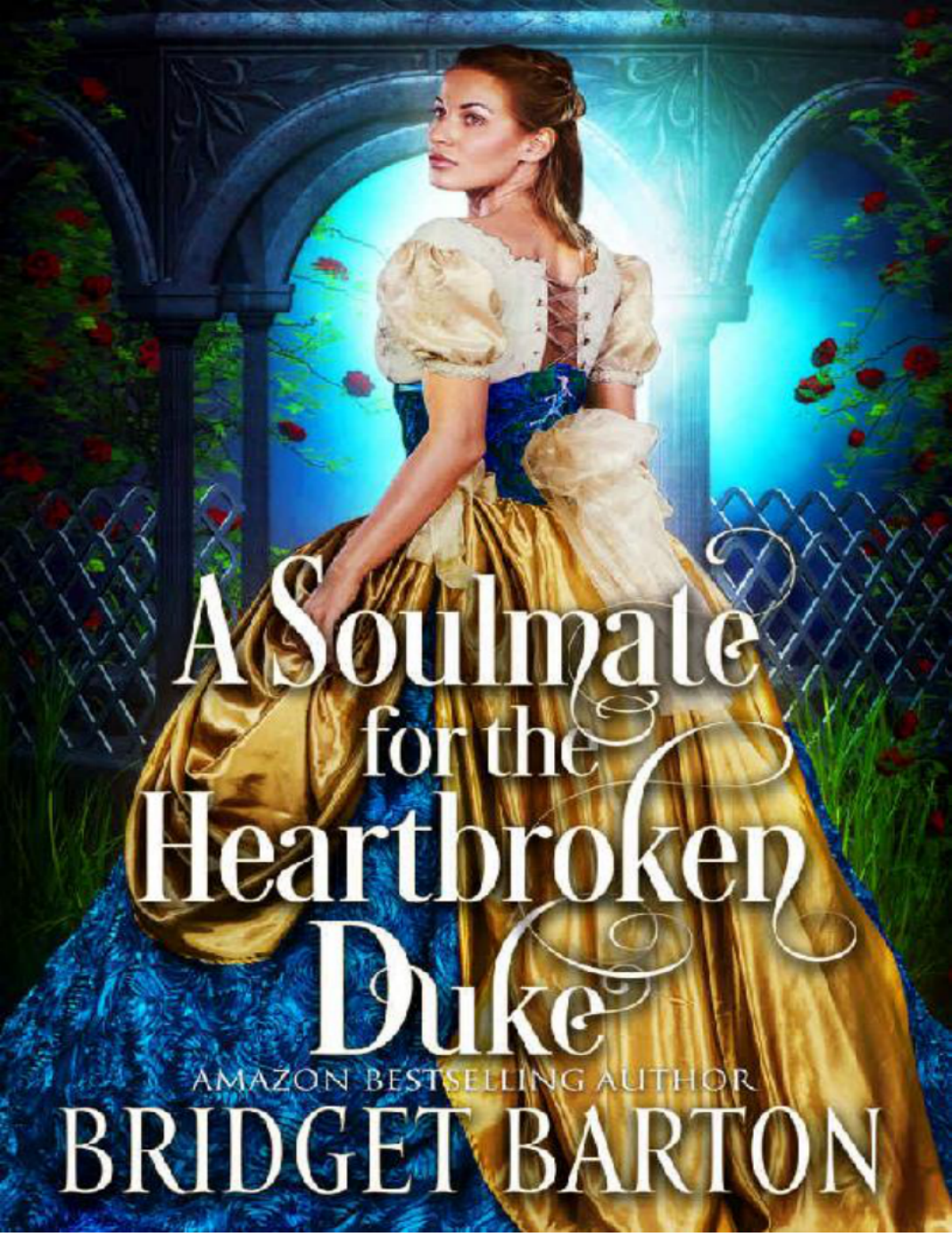

A Soulmate for the Heartbroken Duke
AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BRIDGET BARTON

A Soulmate for the Heartbroken Duke

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

BRIDGET BARTON

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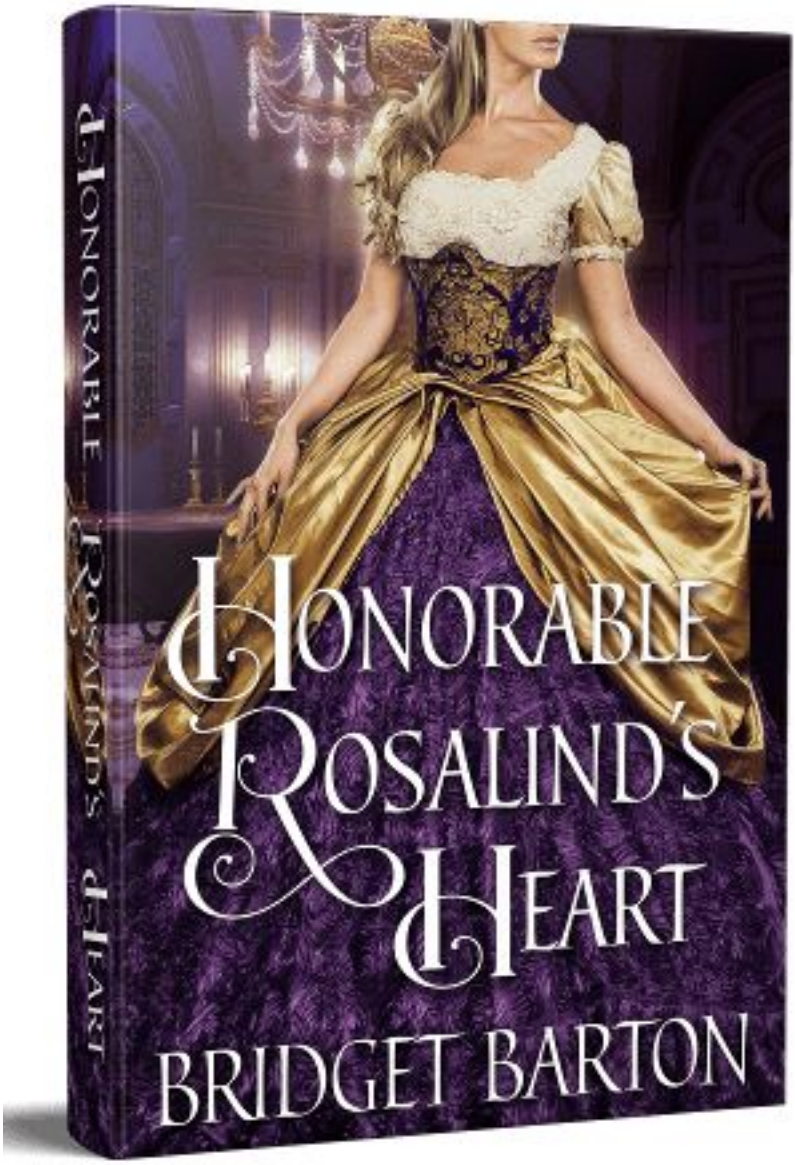
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HONORABLE ROSALIND'S HEART
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A Soulmate for the Heartbroken Duke

Introduction

When Lord Thomas Carlton, second son of the Duke of Shawcross, decides one fateful afternoon in his youth to befriend the beautiful Lady Catherine Ambrose, he could never conceive of the events that would follow. Tired of his father's bullying and arrogance, he thinks he will amuse himself by making a friend of the daughter of the Duke's bitterest enemy; The Earl of Barford. Little did he know how he would fall in love with Lady Catherine and let loose a chain of events that could seemingly be stopped by nothing and nobody.

Lady Catherine Ambrose, daughter of the Earl of Barford, knew what it was to grow up in a household where little was thought of a young woman. Her father was more concerned with his bitter feud with the Duke of Shawcross than the welfare of his offspring. When Thomas Carlton first speaks with her at a summer ball, Catherine thinks him daring and amusing, not to mention handsome. But, within a short space of time, she finds herself hopelessly in love with him. A love that would never, ever fade.

When the two are discovered and parted by their families, Catherine finds herself adrift in a world she does not know, a place so far from home. But will she find peace there? And can her new family help her through the most shocking event of her life? And, when all is settled,

can the two young lovers finally make their way back to each other and live in the love that should have been theirs all along?

Chapter 1

Lady Catherine Ambrose, having had high hopes for a pleasant evening, realized that it was not going to come to pass. Her father, the Earl of Barford, was in a more than usual state of agitation, given that he and his oldest enemy had found themselves attending the same dance.

The setting was too large and well attended for the evening to be considered intimate, and too small for the event to be described as a ball. All in all, the term *dance* would have to suffice.

“A ball is one thing,” her father said in his bellicose manner. “I can ignore the damned fellow at a ball. But this is too small. I have a mind to leave.”

“We could leave if you would prefer it, Father,” Philip Ambrose, Catherine’s brother, said in the sort of coaxing voice one might use on an angry bear. “Shall I have the carriage brought round?”

“No, damn you!” The Earl looked furious and responded in a voice that was certainly loud enough to be heard over the music and the chatter of the evening.

Philip looked crestfallen and, Catherine realized, a little humiliated. As far as she was concerned, her brother did not deserve to feel either one of those things, and it gave Catherine pain to see it. In the end, Philip just gave a brief, respectful nod and turned away a little, clearly determined to let his father carry on with his vile mood in his own way and without assistance.

Being in a vile mood was a lifelong state of being for Oscar Ambrose, and Catherine could not remember a time when he was any different.

And that was just his day to day existence; when his bitterest enemy was added into the equation, his mood grew fouler still.

Catherine wondered briefly why it was when the animus between the Earl of Barford and the Duke of Shawcross was so widely known, that Lord Vinton had chosen to invite them both to a smaller gathering. The whole thing was as a red rag to a bull where her father was concerned, and she had little doubt that the Duke of Shawcross was similarly affected.

But then, Lord Vinton should not really have to dwell on such things; it was down to two grown men to behave better, not down to a whole county to carefully choreograph every social occasion so that the men did not have to stand within a few yards of one another.

Catherine liked Lord Vinton. He was a kindly old baron who probably thought the Earl and the Duke should bury the hatchet, and he was welcoming to all who crossed his threshold.

His country mansion was neither small nor large, and the room they were in for the food and dancing was too big to be a drawing room and too small to be a ballroom. But Catherine liked it very much. It was a bright room, the wood-paneled walls painted a pale cream, giving it an airy, if not overly spacious, feel.

There were tables and chairs set around the outer edges of the hall, and enough good food to keep everybody happy.

Catherine's father had kept to his feet all night, however, as if to sit down would somehow be to give some advantage or other to Penrose Carlton, the Duke. And for his part, it would seem that the Duke of Shawcross was under the same impression, also choosing to stand, with his eldest son looking as if he was trying to placate his father in the same way as Philip had tried to placate theirs.

When two of her father's acquaintances came to join them, Catherine gave a silent sigh of relief. It allowed her to take half a step backward from the group and involve herself in matters of the room without having to concentrate on her father's conversation.

Philip, however, was not so blessed, being drawn into it all and shown off by the father who had, not two minutes before, spoken to him as if he were a child or servant.

But Catherine knew she must take what she could get and so looked all around to satisfy her curiosity over who had turned up to the event, who had fallen into conversation, and who, like her, was just satisfying themselves with a good study of everyone else in the room.

As she gazed around, Catherine found herself looking right at Thomas Carlton, the Duke's second son. He appeared to have been scanning the room as she was, and he smiled a little sheepishly when their eyes met.

He no doubt thought he had been caught out in his secret observations, but no more than she had, so she smiled back. Catherine was careful to make the smile brief, not because she had any argument with Thomas Carlton, but because she did not want her father to see it.

She allowed her eyes to stray to her father and his sycophantic friends and then back to Thomas Carlton. He was still looking at her when she turned back, and Catherine smiled again by instinct. She knew almost nothing about the young man, except what she could see with her eyes, and certainly had no quarrel with him.

And he was such a handsome man too, even more so than his older brother. But his older brother was the heir to the Duchy and, whenever she had the luxury of studying that family, Catherine could easily see how Thomas Carlton was of much slimmer consideration to

all around them, occupying much the same position in his family as she did in her own.

The evening progressed well enough, with more of her father's acquaintances gathering around him, just as the Duke of Shawcross seemed to be attracting his own small following. It was always the same for men of title, and Catherine stifled a laugh when she ridiculously thought that she was glad she was not a man of title herself. Being Lady Catherine was title enough, and one which gave her no power whatsoever.

"Would you do me the honour, my dear Catherine." Lord Vinton appeared suddenly and with such a warm smile that Catherine could not refuse.

"It would be an honour, Sir," she said with amusing grandeur and was pleased to see Lord Vinton appreciated her gentle humour.

They made their way to join the rest of the dancers, lined up with the finely dressed ladies and gentlemen, and respectfully bowed at one another before the dancing finally began.

As Catherine made her first turn, she saw Thomas Carlton just two spaces away, dancing with Lord Vinton's ageing sister, Ariadne. She caught his eye again and, just as before, he smiled at her. She returned his smile before completing her turn and facing away from him.

With a show of the vigilance that was a habit with her, Catherine darted a quick look over to her father to be sure he had not seen the tiny smile that he would have viewed as a huge betrayal.

Mercifully, Lord Vinton chattered his way happily through the entire dance, taking her mind off her father, and her eyes off the handsome Thomas Carlton.

And he really was handsome in a very distinctive way. Thomas Carlton was not a classically appealing man. His hair was more red than brown, and his eyes were not the startling blue of romance novels, nor the dark, inky pools of poetry. Instead, they were the palest blue, the colour of the sky on a day when the sun was so weak it barely shone; the very palest sky blue.

His face was handsome in a way many might easily dismiss. It was a clever, knowing face, with angles and furrows, not the symmetrical face of the sort of handsome hero who was, in her opinion, all too prevalent these days.

There was something about Thomas Carlton, something almost mesmerising. But it was something that she had determined to ignore or at least only study from afar for the sake of her own curiosity. They certainly could never be friends, so what did it matter if she found him unusual and most pleasing to look at?

When the dancing had finished, Catherine returned to her party, joining Philip, who had made his way to the edge of things.

“You danced very well, Catherine.” Philip smiled genuinely.

“Thank you. I do so like Lord Vinton.”

“He is a kindly sort of a chap. I like him too.” Philip nodded, his young face so handsome and bright; his features as open as his father’s were closed.

“I see we are to stand for the entire evening,” Catherine said with a shrug, looking vaguely towards their father and the men who had surrounded him.

“Well, if the Duke stands, Father will stand,” Philip smirked. “It is all so ridiculous.”

“It is. But I am glad to see you finding a little respite from the crowd. I do not envy you your responsibilities, Philip.”

“Thank you.” He squeezed her hand briefly. “Oh, for a night where the party might simply be enjoyed for its own sake!” He laughed amiably, but Catherine felt for him all the same.

“Could you not ask a young lady to dance? Surely there would be no harm in that?”

“I would like to, but you know how father likes to direct that sort of thing. If he saw me dancing with a woman of my own choosing, he would declare her a title hunter and me a fool for not having sought his advice in the first place.”

“I know that is true,” she said sadly. “We lead such lives of oppression, do we not?”

“We do,” Philip said with an almost inappropriate brightness. “Although you might stave off that oppression for a few minutes, for I have just spied Emily Barton drifting out of the room. Look,” he said and nodded to the young woman’s departing back. “You wanted to speak to her about this week’s bridge, did you not?”

“Oh yes, I did,” Catherine said with purpose. “I wonder if I would be missed.”

“Probably not.” Philip laughed. “But if you are, I shall explain your absence.”

“Thank you.”

“Go, or you might miss her.”

Catherine hurried through the crowd with a fixed, polite smile. She was careful not to make eye contact with anybody, lest she be drawn into some conversation or other and miss the chance to speak to Emily Barton at all.

But, despite her best efforts, by the time Catherine had made her way out of the room, Emily was nowhere to be seen.

Catherine looked up and down the corridor, wondering if Emily had headed in the direction of the entrance hall to leave, or towards the other end of the house where she might find some way outside for a few minutes' air.

Thinking it too early for Emily to be leaving, Catherine decided upon the second option and headed further along the west corridor. All was quiet, and she listened for any sound of Emily's footsteps in the distance.

But the mansion was so full of sounds that she soon gave up careful listening as an impossible idea and trudged onward.

"Are you trying to escape, Lady Catherine?" Catherine gasped and wheeled sharply around to see none other than Thomas Carlton standing behind her.

"No, I … well …" she stammered, unsure how to proceed. "I was actually looking for Emily Barton, Lord Thomas."

"Then I am afraid to report that you have missed her. I heard her making hasty goodbyes to Lord Vinton before leaving."

"Oh dear. And I do so want to speak to her about the bridge," Catherine said, trying to think how she should maintain normal conversation with a young man she was certain she ought to look upon as her enemy if only to be loyal to her own family.

“Forgive me, but was it to enquire if her new bridge afternoon was to begin this week? For if that was your question, I might be able to help.”

“Yes, that *was* my question. I have been looking forward to it but was unsure of the date for the first of the meetings.”

“Then I can tell you it is next Wednesday afternoon at one o’clock. I believe Miss Barton will be sending around hasty invites over the next couple of days. In her excitement, I am told she had forgotten to do so before. It has caused a great deal of confusion and excitement, which is apt because a game of bridge always leaves me rather confused and occasionally excited.” He grinned at her, the skin around his pale blue eyes wrinkling pleasingly as he did so.

“I am no great player myself.” She laughed. “If that is any consolation at all?”

“It most certainly is. I shall not feel so unique on Wednesday afternoon.”

“Oh, are you to attend?” she said, feeling pleased and perturbed all at once.

“I am.” He smiled brightly. “And you look uncertain about it all. Perhaps you would enjoy the afternoon better if I did not go?”

“You may go wherever you choose, Lord Thomas. Please do not think I would see you barred from any event, Sir.” She smiled weakly.

He really was such a pleasant young man, and he always had been. Whilst they had never spoken for as long as they were at that moment, whenever their paths had crossed in the past, Thomas Carlton had always acknowledged her politely, no hint of sarcasm or thinly veiled

malice.

“Forgive me.” He bowed. “I am sure you would not. I suppose I am alluding to the strain which exists between our two families. But then, neither one of us can do anything about that, and so I should not have alluded to it at all.”

“Please, I am not insulted,” she said and relaxed for long enough to smile at him warmly. “And it is hard not to allude to something that taints evenings such as this one.” She looked back towards the hall. “Evenings that should be relaxed into and enjoyed without wondering who will give in and sit down first.”

“Oh, you perceived the same as I did.” His laughter, when it came, sounded like relief. “I cannot claim to understand it all, but I must admit myself glad that I do not seem to be the only one.”

“You are not the only one.” She nodded and laughed also.

“Perhaps it is the lot in life for the second born? To have just enough freedom from expectation to be able to observe whilst remaining unobserved oneself.”

“You put that very well, Lord Thomas, and I already agreed before you had spoken.”

“Well, perhaps there has been something to enjoy in this evening after all. Brief, perhaps, but enjoyable nonetheless.”

“I am in agreement once more.” She smiled but could feel a little panic rising. “But I think I must return to my party before I am missed.”

“I understand, Lady Catherine. And I hope to see you at Emily Barton’s bridge afternoon on Wednesday.”

“Yes, I hope so too,” she said and smiled before turning to hurry back to her family.

Chapter 2

“I grow tired of Augustus Mortimer and his attempts to ingratiate himself to me.” The Earl of Barford, although clearly speaking to Philip, did not bother to look up from his breakfast plate.

Instead, he just kept cutting off great chunks of bacon and stuffing them into his mouth as he spoke.

“I cannot abide people who see an acquaintance with me as a pathway to something better for themselves. No doubt this one has his eye on my money. I should have seen it before.” He raised his head finally if only to look at Philip for a moment. “Take heed, boy. Always be on the lookout for the ones in want of a free passage in life.” He looked down at his plate again and continued his indelicate attack upon the breakfast plate.

Catherine had all but finished her breakfast when her father had barged into the room. She ordinarily was down so much earlier that she did not often encounter the Earl at the breakfast table, finding she preferred to start the day in that fashion.

But whenever he had risen a little earlier, catching her off-guard, Catherine had never dared leave the table before her father did, even on a day such as that one when her breakfast was all but done by the time he strode in.

“Yes, Father,” Philip said and was as calm and attentive as always.

Despite the fact that the Earl had always paid Philip the attention an heir was bound to get, and her less than nothing, the siblings had always been the greatest of friends. Their father’s unequal treatment of them had never stood in the way of their fond regard for one another.

As much as Philip apologised for their father's neglect of her, Catherine apologised for their father's overbearing attention to Philip. And so, the two were easily appeased, understanding that they had no control of the man who ruled them and choosing to seek solace in each other's friendship, rather than bitterness as rivals.

As her father continued to eat, making the sort of noises a pig might make, Catherine concentrated hard on sipping her now-cold tea and studying a patch of paintwork in the corner, above one of the large windows, which was peeling.

It had been peeling for a while, although it was in a spot seldom looked at, so it was likely that neither her father nor Philip had noticed.

And it was so slight as not to mar the otherwise fine decoration of the breakfast room. The room was still clean and bright, its pale green walls and white half-paneling very attractive indeed. It was on the east of Barford Hall, and always got the best of whatever morning sunlight was available.

Catherine liked the room; it was a place where she and Philip enjoyed the one meal of the day they could often take alone, giving them the opportunity to talk unguardedly as they ate.

"I was going to marry Catherine off to that boy of his, even though he is a dreadful milksop." The Earl looked up at Philip again as he talked as if Catherine were not even in the room. "I thought it might do me some good later down the line to have Francis Mortimer as a son-in-law. He's passive, you see," he continued, the high colour of the skin on his cheeks standing out starkly against the grey-white of his thick hair. "But I have let the idea drift. Augustus has become a little too sure of the outcome, and he needs teaching a lesson." He laughed suddenly. "I hope the fool has spent the dowry he likely has it in his

head will come to him, for he shall not get any."

Philip did not look at his sister, but his barely perceptible flinch was enough for her to know that he was as appalled by what he was hearing as Catherine.

The idea that the Earl could be so childish, giving favour and taking it away so suddenly diminished him even further in her eyes. But she could see how her father's arrogance and capriciousness had worked in her favour on this particular occasion, for she would not have liked to have found herself unwillingly betrothed to Francis Mortimer; she did not like the man at all.

The idea, however, that this was the first indication that such a union had even been a possibility made her feel a little warm and suddenly nauseous. It was proof, if further proof was needed that she meant nothing and was utterly powerless. It reminded her that her life could change so suddenly and without warning, and there would be nothing she could do to stop it. All she could do was blow this way and that on the wind of her father's plans.

"Right," the Earl said, rising to his feet in an awful scraping of chair against floorboards. "I have some matters to attend to, Philip, and then I shall be setting off to see the attorney. You will come with me; it will do you some good," he said. "Be ready to leave when I call you." And with that, the Earl strode out of the room.

It occurred briefly to Catherine that her father had yet to even bid her good morning, but she would not mourn the loss of his greeting. She was just relieved to be rid of his presence.

"Are you alright, Catherine?" Philip said in a quiet, cautious voice.

"Yes. A little shocked, but I shall survive it." She sipped at her cold tea again to relieve her dry mouth.

“Here.” Philip rose and took another cup from the sideboard laden with breakfast items.

He poured her a fresh cup of tea from the still-warm pot and set it down in front of her.

“Thank you,” she said and sipped gratefully. “What would I do without you? Who would be here to even notice my presence in the world?”

“I am so sorry,” Philp said gently. “But I am relieved to hear you shall not be marrying Francis Mortimer. You are safe.”

“For a while I am. I am safe until our father sees some benefit to himself in another union for me.”

“I wish things could be different.”

“I know you do. I wish they could be different for the both of us.”

“Come, let us talk of brighter things.” Philip lightened his tone, but the effort to do so was clear to Catherine.

“Yes. But you must find the topic, for I am still a little waylaid by my own shock.”

“Of course.” He laid a hand on hers briefly. “Tell me, are you looking forward to the afternoon buffet at Morton Hall? I believe Lady Morton lays on quite a spread.”

“Yes, I am.” She smiled, knowing their mood to be contrived, but determined to fake it into reality. “And she always has sugary treats too. I enjoy those, although I cannot eat too many or they make me unwell.”

“What a pleasant thing that our father never attends daytime events. You will have some respite, I think.”

“I would like it more if you came with me.”

“He has my week all arranged. I am to follow him everywhere like a faithful dog.”

“You have my sympathy, Philip.”

Catherine’s brother was a kind and handsome young man. At two-and-twenty, he was just two years older than she, although she knew his responsibilities to be vaster and very different. She knew that those responsibilities weighed heavily upon him too, for their father was not a man who allowed mistakes or explained a thing more than once before expecting a person to know it all by heart.

The strain of it all was something she could often see on Philip’s face, and she felt sure it would age his handsome features prematurely.

“But Emily Barton will be there, will she not? The two of you seem to get along well I notice.”

“Yes, Emily is very fine company. I like her a good deal.”

“Just see that Father does not perceive too great a friendship, or he will arbitrarily break it apart.”

“Indeed, that is a lesson we have both learned to our cost.” She smiled sadly as she remembered the array of friends whose company the two Ambrose offspring had been systematically disallowed over the years.

“Did you enjoy her first bridge afternoon last Wednesday? Tell me, was it a success? I hope it was.”

“Yes, she did very well indeed. The debacle of the late invitations was easily remedied and forgotten by all who attended. She made it a pleasant afternoon, very relaxed. I was pleased for her.”

“Philip!” Their father’s voiced boomed from some distance, still loud enough, however, to make them both start.

“He must be ready to go.” Philip rose from the table. “No, keep to your seat and finish your tea.”

“Thank you.”

“And let us hope that breakfast will be a lot freer tomorrow morning.” He gave her the secret little wink he had always given since they were children.

It was their way of acknowledging the things they were not always safe to voice aloud, and she winked back, even though she knew it was hardly ladylike.

Philip kissed the top of her head as he passed her, disappearing off into the corridor beyond. When she heard no more of his departing footsteps, Catherine resumed her familiar study of the patch of peeling pale green paint above the window.

She really had enjoyed the bridge afternoon. Not just because Emily Barton had made such a success of it, but because she had enjoyed her own, subdued excitement there.

Ever since her little encounter with the Duke of Shawcross’ son in Lord Vinton’s mansion, Catherine had found herself looking forward to the bridge afternoon, even if she nursed a small amount of fear at the same time.

Certain that Thomas Carlton would be there, Catherine had found herself putting a little extra effort into her appearance. Nothing that would be obvious, but something that could be easily explained by the importance of the day for her friend Emily.

Catherine had worn a simple, short-sleeved gown in dusky pink. She liked the colour, although most colours suited her given that her hair was a nice, medium brown. She had quite neutral colouring, with creamy skin and hazel eyes that were rather almond shaped.

With her brown curls piled neatly onto her head, Catherine had slid a small comb into her hair. It had tiny flowers on it and was delicate rather than ostentatious. Still, she was pleased when Thomas had made a point of complimenting her on the little adornment.

“How nice the little flowers look, Lady Catherine.” It had been his opening line to her, and she found herself very pleased to have worn the comb at all.

“Thank you, Lord Thomas.” She felt shy and a little afraid.

“I see we neither of us have the benefit of family today,” he said in a tone which suggested that such a thing would hardly be a benefit at all.

“No, we are quite free,” she agreed. “Although I must admit a tendency towards caution as a habit of mine.”

“Indeed, mine too.” He smiled, his pale blue eyes and red-brown hair seeming all the more handsome in the brighter light of Emily Barton’s drawing room. “And I promise I shall not linger too long and be the cause of any dangerous gossip.”

“I thank you, although I am bound to say I wish there were not such a need for this caution. It puts a strain on a conversation.”

“Only if we let it.” He looked cautiously around in a way she found reassuring. He was not taking undue risks, and she was grateful for it. “Perhaps we could secretly try to ignore this pointless feud and treat each other as friends?”

“I would like that, Sir,” Catherine said with feeling. “I am tired of feeling constraint whichever way I turn.”

“Yes, constraint is a thing that is to be found all over the place.” He laughed, and Catherine thought him very amusing. “It is in my family, at any rate.”

“Well, I shall admit to the son of my father’s enemy that the oppression of his offspring is something of a determined hobby to the Earl of Barford.”

“Good heavens, but that is funny!” he said and grinned at her. “But is that really how you see me? It seems awfully sad somehow and leaves me wondering what I can do to change such a description of me.”

“Perhaps you have already done enough to make that very description redundant, Lord Thomas.”

“I am glad to hear it. It spurs me on to better attempts.”

“As long as those attempts are as discreet as this one. We do not want to anger our respective fathers.”

“No indeed. I know for a fact that my father’s anger, once excited, can sustain itself on nothing more than fresh air for many weeks at a time. Months, more often than not.”

“Good heavens, but that is funny!” she said, parroting his earlier words and pleased to see that he had not only noticed her little game

but that he appreciated it.

“You are a clever lady. I think I shall like you very much,” he said, and the pale blue eyes looked amused and content. “But I shall leave you now for fear that my pleasure in my newfound friendship exposes us both to comment.”

“Thank you.”

“But I should like your permission to approach you again one day.”

“And so you have it, Sir.”

Catherine had hardly been able to concentrate on her bridge playing for the rest of the afternoon and had come away wondering how it was that she had won every game she played.

Smiling at the memory, Catherine kept to her seat and stared at the peeling green paint until the maids came tentatively into the room to clear away.

“Oh, forgive me,” Catherine said with a smile. “I had drifted off a little, and I did not mean to put you off your work.”

“Not at all, My Lady.” Violet, the older of the two young women spoke for them both.

“I shall let you have the room; otherwise, I shall stare into space all day.” She smiled at them before leaving, feeling in much greater spirits than she had expected to be just a few minutes before. As she made her way back up to her chamber for a few more minutes in which to think the whole thing through again in private, Catherine knew that it was thoughts of Lord Thomas Carlton which had cheered her so, and there was no denying it.

Chapter 3

Thomas had been very much looking forward to the afternoon affair at Lady Morton's. He liked Lady Morton enormously, but he was always honest with himself and readily admitted that it was the promise of a few moments' snatched conversation with the Earl of Barford's daughter which was making it all the more exciting.

The news, however, that he would be joined for the afternoon by his brother, Pierce, had put something of a dampener on his ideas. He knew that Pierce would not understand for a moment if he saw his brother talking to an Ambrose of Barford Hall.

Pierce was fiercely loyal to his father and would see the act of simple conversation between two young people as nothing short of treason. If their father was the King, that was. And in their household, he was.

"Good evening, Lord Carlton," Lady Morton said brightly as she addressed Pierce. "Oh, and here is Thomas. What a treat to have you both here."

Lady Morton was always informal with Thomas. He knew that she liked him very much and did not mind at all that all the formality was reserved for his brother.

In fact, Thomas had always felt a quiet relief that he was the Duke's second son and not his first. He much preferred being the *spare* rather than the *heir*, although he never made his feelings known.

The idea of spending so much time with his father certainly did not appeal. Penrose Carlton had been a largely indifferent father, although he did exercise his notice of his second son whenever there was some punishment to be dealt out.

Praise was something far more elusive and, Thomas thought, likely not something his father would bestow on either of his sons.

In that, he felt a little sorry for Pierce, even though the two of them did not share a strong bond. They were only ever tentative friends at best, and even then, only once in a great while.

Pierce was, Thomas had to admit, destined for the title. It would suit him well, and he would suit it. But he would be a Duke in his father's style; blunt, arrogant, and without conscience when it came to their tenant farmers.

Thomas often wondered what his place would be in all of it. More than once, he imagined himself being diverted into the clergy; given a tidy little living somewhere before being essentially forgotten.

Although such thoughts were something he largely thought the silly product of an over-active imagination, still he did not voice them for fear of giving his unshakeable father ideas. He could not begin to imagine how dreary life would be as a clergyman, even if it would mean no longer having to suffer his father's moods, whims, and outbursts.

"What a treat it is to be here, Lady Morton. Thank you kindly for your invitation," Thomas said enthusiastically. "I am looking forward to this afternoon enormously."

"Oh, what a fine young man you are." Lady Morton beamed. "And I have a little treat for my guests today. One I hope you will all enjoy."

"Please, do not leave me dangling in suspense, my dear woman." Thomas laughed.

"I have hired the travelling theatre company," she said with

excitement.

“Are we to have a play?” Thomas felt excited too, and not for just the obvious pleasure of being entertained but for the diversion it might cause.

He wondered if the travelling players would be engaging enough that he might at least share a look, or even a word or two, with the beautiful Lady Catherine Ambrose.

And she was beautiful too. He had noticed her time and again in the last couple of years since she had blossomed and he had grown up enough to notice. But, until he had actually spoken to her that evening at Lord Vinton’s, she had simply been the object of his idle curiosity.

Thomas had never imagined for a moment that he would ever get to know the woman. The feud between the families was something that had always existed in Thomas’ lifetime and, therefore, was a habit, even for him.

“We *are* to have a play. Only for a few minutes, perhaps half an hour, for it is just a simple, short little tale. But I thought it might make a nice change and add a little something to the afternoon.”

“It most certainly shall. How clever of you, Lady Morton,” Thomas enthused whilst Pierce simply nodded and began to look bored.

“Well, enjoy the afternoon, gentlemen.” Lady Morton smiled before fluttering away to greet her next waiting guests.

“Must you always be so damned enthusiastic?” Pierce muttered disdainfully under his breath. “Must you behave so grateful for every invitation?”

“What on earth is wrong with that?” Thomas said even though he

already knew the answer.

“You are the son of the Duke of Shawcross. Our family honours such minor establishments as this with our presence.”

“I am afraid I do not see things as you do.”

“Then it is just as well you will never hold a title greater than the one you have now,” Pierce said dismissively.

Thomas was inclined to be angry about his brother’s arrogance, not to mention the insult, but he did not want to set Pierce against him for the afternoon. He wanted things to be easy, to have a flow to them.

After all, he did not want to miss an opportunity to have a minute with Lady Catherine by being at odds with Pierce. He wanted Pierce to concentrate on the little play he had turned his nose up at, just long enough for something of excitement to happen in Thomas’ world.

The play started a little earlier than Thomas had assumed it would, however, and he had barely had time to fix Lady Catherine’s exact location in the immense drawing room before the whole thing began.

Pierce was fidgety; he was undoubtedly agitated by the speed of things also, not having had much chance to pick at the buffet tables before all eyes turned to the makeshift stage. As such, it was clear that Pierce was not going to concentrate on the thing at all. And, as much as Thomas had wanted to get to Catherine, he knew that it was too big a risk.

Even peering across at her was something he could only do cautiously. And when he did, he almost gave himself away. Catherine was wearing a pretty ivory gown with tiny blue flowers and a thick blue ribbon at the bust line. Her hair was up again with that same tiny comb she had worn to Emily Barton’s, its flowers barely visible to him

from across the room.

Her appearance was pretty, and her face was beautiful. And at the moment he caught her eye, and she gave him the briefest, most secret of smiles, Thomas felt as if he were falling backward through the air as if he had fallen off a cliff and was plummeting. She really was the most beautiful of women, but he knew there was more to it. Perhaps it was the excitement; the fraternization with the enemy, as it were.

But he could never see her as the enemy, and he was sure that he never had. One thing was for certain, however, and that was that he would never see her as the enemy in the future either, whatever happened in their respective worlds.

The play came to an end and Thomas, not having heard a word of it, felt guilty when Lady Morton looked at him for a silent seal of approval. All he could do was smile and nod enthusiastically, although that appeared to be more than enough to satisfy her.

Within minutes of the play's end, Pierce was eating from a large plated selection of food from the buffet tables. Still, even that did not have him fully occupied, and Thomas had to admit that he would likely suffer the rest of the afternoon not having one single opportunity for romance.

He could hardly believe how frustrating the whole thing was, especially when he had only ever spoken to Lady Catherine on two previous occasions, and each of those had been for a matter of minutes and no more.

How could he be so determined, almost desperate, to have just a minute or two with her now? What did it really matter to him?

"What is wrong with you? You are distracted today," Pierce said gruffly as he eyed him keenly.

“I am perfectly well.”

“Who are you looking at?”

“What?” Thomas said and had the awful feeling he was about to be discovered. “I have not been looking at anybody.”

“Your head snaps around as if it is on a spring. I say that you are looking at someone.” Pierce, when he was being arrogant, looked ever more like their father.

Pierce looked more like their father altogether, having his father’s dark hair and heavy brows, whereas Thomas had taken after their mother. And it seemed that the Duke liked the idea of a son who looked just like him. It was expected after all.

So, Pierce had done the right thing by being born first and having the good grace to be the very image of his father, and Thomas had wandered along second with his mother’s reddish hair and pale blue eyes. In short, he would have been a disappointment if his father had known he was there at all.

“Unless you count Louisa Ravensthorpe. She is always worth a moment’s appreciation.” Thomas lied; he had never taken the slightest interest in Louisa Ravensthorpe and never would.

“No, I do not think her worth a thing. She would not do for me at all. But then I have higher standards and expectations.” Pierce, pleased with himself for finding the slimmest opportunity to be self-satisfied and arrogant, smiled inwardly before returning to the buffet tables.

Thomas took a moment to feel outraged on Louisa Ravensthorpe’s behalf before wondering if his brother had been adequately diverted. He studied his back for a moment and could see no reason why Pierce

might know his brother to be lying.

For one thing, Pierce did not know Thomas well enough to see the signs of a little untruth and, for another, he was sure that his brother would never imagine him to be foolish enough to form some sort of attachment to the daughter of the Duke of Shawcross; it was tantamount to making a deal with the Devil.

With Pierce still intent upon eating his way through the afternoon, Thomas risked another look in Catherine's direction. Emily Barton had left her side for some reason, although he hardly imagined it would do him any good. Thomas knew he could not risk any attempt at conversation. After all, his brother had only to turn around, and the whole thing would be over.

But he could get just a little closer, could he not? He could drift by her and satisfy at least a tiny part of his newfound longing.

Thomas moved immediately, not wanting to be thwarted by either Emily Barton's return or his brother's sudden change of position. He stepped quickly and easily through the crowd, only slowing as he reached her. He cast a final look at Pierce and was satisfied that he was still diverted. When he looked up again at Catherine, he realized she had seen his approach, and he gave her the briefest, most secret of smiles.

Catherine, as cautious as he, cast her eyes around the room before returning that secret smile. Thomas did not even nod as he passed her, he knew she did not need or want such open acknowledgement. In their own way, they had already acknowledged one another, and Thomas felt it to be very much more intimate than if they had been able to speak freely.

As he passed her, Thomas had breathed deeply. There was a delicate fragrance about Catherine, something floral; jasmine, perhaps. It was

just a hint on the air, a clean, fresh scent. Certainly, it was not the cloying, overpowering scent designed to mask the lack of bathing rituals that was common even among their own class.

Whatever it was, it was heavenly to him, and all he wanted was to turn around and breathe her in all over again. But he did not; he made his way over to his brother and tried to take an active role in the rest of the afternoon.

Finally, Pierce found himself in the sort of sycophantic company he enjoyed. It made Pierce feel powerful and superior, and Thomas could almost see his brother grow taller under such attention. That being the case, Thomas was a little freer now, for his brother had no use at all for him.

But, just as things were finally working in his favour, Thomas realized that Lady Catherine was nowhere to be seen.

Checking that he was still unobserved, Thomas made his way out of the drawing room and hovered not far from the entrance hallway. There he could see Lady Catherine, a deep blue cloak around her shoulders, tying a matching bonnet over her lovely brown curls.

Lady Morton was chattering to her, getting ready to say farewell to her guest. It looked to Thomas like Catherine would be leaving alone, and he wondered if he might have the smallest opportunity now.

Whilst the two women were distracted with their goodbyes, he sneaked past them and out through the door. He darted away quickly, not stopping until he reached the neat, tall box hedging that shielded the townhouse from the street beyond on all sides.

Undoubtedly, Lady Catherine's carriage would be among those lining the street outside, and he did not want her to be seen talking to him by her father's driver. Servants could never be entirely relied upon,

and the driver might have such strong loyalties to the father that he would sacrifice the daughter. No, he had another plan entirely and waited, hardly daring to breathe, until she finally came out.

He could hear the sound of her footsteps only, which was a relief to him and, when he stepped out from the box hedging, he was even more relieved to see with his own eyes that she was alone.

“Lord Thomas!” he hissed, and there was a flash of annoyance on her face.

“I am sorry to startle you,” he said and then took a further risk by lightly grasping her arm and leading her to stand with him behind the hedging.

“You did give me a fright,” she said and laughed. “I almost struck you, actually.”

“I do not blame you,” he whispered.

“You do know we cannot conduct a full conversation behind this hedge. We will either get caught, or your brother will realize your absence and grow suspicious. Now do tell me what it is you have to say, and then you must release me.” Despite the firmness of her words, Thomas could see in her soft, almond-shaped eyes that she was pleased to see him, pleased to have these few stolen moments.

“I shall come straight to the point, Lady Catherine. I really must see you.”

“You can see me. I am standing right here.”

“No, I mean for longer than a few seconds,” he said with a hint of amused exasperation. “I like you very much already, and I want to speak to you properly.”

“I see,” she said and looked as if she was really, really thinking about it.

“Look, you need not answer me this instant. I will go out to Stromlyn Lake on Friday morning, and I shall wait for you. I will wait the whole morning and, if you do not come, then I shall take that as your answer.” He smiled at Catherine and felt moved to be in such proximity to her.

“I have to go, Thomas,” she said, and her smile, before she left him, gave nothing away.

He watched from his vantage point for a moment as she hurried down the street and hoped against all hope that she would go to Stromlyn Lake on Friday.

With a sigh, he hurried back into the townhouse, surprised to see Lady Morton still hovering in the entrance hall.

She smiled at him knowingly, and Thomas panicked, realizing he had not thought the whole thing through properly.

“Lady Morton … I …” He faltered, knowing there was nothing he could say.

“Please do not fear, Thomas. I have no intention of giving you away my dear boy,” she said kindly and took his arm, slowly walking him back towards the drawing room. “Why would I upset the lives of two of the nicest young people I know?”

“Forgive me, I panicked.” Thomas looked ruefully at her. “But she is so very beautiful, is she not?”

“The most beautiful. And precious too.” She patted his arm as they

walked. “So precious that she should be looked after properly. Many is the time I wished she were my own daughter; then she would be free.”

“You are very kind.”

“I did not mean to spy on you, but I thought you might need a little subterfuge to get you back into the drawing room.” She smiled mischievously. “Your brother is not as dull-witted as you suspect him to be.” Thomas was dumbfounded; how on earth had Lady Morton perceived his feelings for his brother. “Do not take that for granted, for he would give you away in a heartbeat.”

“I shall heed your wise words.”

“And allow me to be your alibi my dear, should your brother wonder where you have been.” She was whispering now as they re-entered the drawing room. “For you have been out in the entrance hall with me admiring my new portrait.”

“Quite so,” Thomas said and felt his old enthusiasm returning. “And what a lovely portrait it is too.”

“Oh Thomas, what a fine, silly boy you are,” she said and laughed warmly.

Thomas realized there and then that he truly had a friend in Lady Morton.

Chapter 4

Stromlyn Lake was much nearer to Catherine's home than Thomas', and she was glad of that. Catherine was often out in the countryside which surrounded her father's estate, and it was a long-established habit.

It was a habit initially borne of the need to be away from her father in a way which did not excite his annoyance. But over the years, Catherine had come to enjoy it, seeing it as time to herself in an enjoyable, rather than an escaping, way.

She was a keen amateur botanist and liked to mentally chart the seasons by observing the flora and fauna all around. Flora and fauna were like clockwork, never letting her down. Mother Nature always knew what to do, overcoming extremes of weather and the interference of man to win through in the end. And all Mother Nature needed to do to secure her silent victory was show up.

Catherine liked the idea of a victory being something secret; something that even one's greatest opponent would not be aware of. She knew, of course, that her line of thinking would not do for everybody.

The point of victory to most people would surely be the opportunity to gloat before your opponent. Perhaps that was the only real purpose of any struggle in the first place.

But Catherine's victory, if there were one to be had, would be her own. It wasn't that she wanted to show her father that she was a person, a human being, with feelings and her own wants, one who did not want to be married away to a disagreeable man of his choosing. In the end, it would make little difference if she did tell him.

No, Catherine did not want a victory that was so obvious. She did not want her father to simply *know* she was a person; she wanted to *be* a person. That was the difference. It wasn't a victory with the opportunity to gloat; it was something quite divorced from any other person.

It was a quiet, personal thing. In order to truly win, perhaps all that was needed was for a person to be themselves; to live as they wished without the input or influence of any other person.

"I did not think you would come. Even though the morning is but half over, still I did not think you would come." Thomas Carlton smiled at her, and his openness in the delivery of his own fears touched her.

"You should have had more faith in me." She smiled at him and walked further along the lake's edge to join him.

"It is not you I did not have faith in, but myself." His smile was bright and wide, and his pale blue eyes really did seem to be the precise colour of the early spring sky. "I did not think you would find me fine enough company to meet me like this."

"In that case, you should have had faith in yourself." She laughed and patted his horse.

The horse was a beautiful brown-chestnut, its colouring not dissimilar to Thomas' own. He had tethered the horse to a low hanging branch, close enough to the water's edge that the handsome beast might take a drink.

"That was a nice compliment, so I thank you." He grinned. "And perhaps I ought to return it."

"No, wait until you have something come to you, rather than hastily trying to think of something. I would prefer it that way."

“Then that is what you shall have.” Thomas bowed.

“Why did you choose this place?” she said and looked all around. “It is beautiful but rather closer to me than you. I was able to walk here in half an hour, but you have had to ride some way.”

“I did not want to force you to travel when I do not mind it at all myself. And I like this place; it is always so deserted.”

“Yes, it is the final descent that puts people off. If you drop down, it follows that you must climb up on your way back.” She smiled. “But I do not mind that either. And I have always liked this place myself, for the same reason that it is so out of the way and little used.”

“The perfect place for two people whose fathers are locked in an age-old feud.” He laughed and removed his tailcoat, laying it over a rough-barked fallen tree trunk. “Here, take a seat.”

“Thank you,” she said and sat down. “So, your father truly would be as angry as mine if he knew you were here with me?”

“Yes,” Thomas said and looked ashamed. “I am sorry. But it would not be because of you, just this pointless, seething animosity between men old enough to know better.”

“Yes, they are old enough to know better, but I am afraid such things get worse with age. If a man has a mind to nurture petty resentments, the habit it forms takes the resentment to greater heights. It builds to a point beyond which nobody knows how it began in the first place. It is simply about conquest; victory. Like so many wars, the original quarrel is superseded by the need to win, to have power over another, and to grind his face into the dirt.”

“Do you know how it all began?” Thomas sat down on the fallen tree

by her side.

He looked so handsome in his shirt sleeves and dark green waistcoat. Green suited him very well indeed. And his face, when he spoke, became animated in a way which made him more handsome still.

Catherine knew that she was beginning to feel something for this determined young man. Even before his curious approach at Lady Morton's townhouse, she had begun to think of him more and more.

There was an impressive sort of courage attached to a young man who defied the constraints of a powerful family simply to be pleasant to the enemy; to make a friend of her.

"No, I have never dared to ask," Catherine said and was full of interest.

"Apparently, our grandfathers both favoured the same woman many, many years ago. They had been friends before but became instant enemies when neither one would yield his interest in the young lady."

"Is that it?" Catherine said and could not hide how appalled she was. "But how did it end? Which of them married her?"

"Neither of them." Thomas' eyes were wide with amusement. "She ran away with a minor baron because she very likely preferred his manners to theirs!" He laughed loudly, and Catherine joined him.

"Well, I shall say it served them both right. No doubt the young lady's feeling in the matter was neither here nor there to them, not the smallest consideration. But she was the victor in the end, was she not? Breaking away from two strutting rams who were locking horns over her, assuming that one or the other must have her." She smiled and shook her head. "Well, whoever she was, I must admit my admiration for her."

“Yes, I think she deserves admiration.” He nodded vigorously. “And things do not change, do they? The lineage goes on and maintains its foolish pride and arrogance on both sides.”

“Yes, with little thought to the feelings of others. Really, that our fathers could consent to continue such foolishness when they had an opportunity to let the thing die with their own fathers.”

“And I have no doubt my brother, Pierce, will see it carry on into another generation.”

“Fortunately, he will find himself alone in the feud then. My brother, Philip, cannot abide the thing and has every intention of keeping out of it in his own way, and then when my father is dead, he will turn his back on it altogether.”

“I had heard that Philip Ambrose was turning into a fine man. And now I have it confirmed by his sister.” Thomas spoke so well, and his voice was far deeper than his age and appearance would have suggested.

“He is. My father has always treated us so differently, making it very clear that I am of little value to the family. But that has never stopped us being friends, and I am grateful for such a bond. Tell me, do you have any common feeling with your brother at all?”

“None whatsoever, I am afraid.” He shrugged and smiled sadly.

“Then I am very sorry to hear that. But how does your father regard you?” She hoped that he would at least have some consideration from his father; otherwise, his family setting would be just too sad.

“Like an afterthought.” He laughed. “I am the spare, only brought into this world as insurance should some tragedy befall my brother. And

my father, like your own, has made little secret of his lack of regard for me."

"It is all so unnecessary, is it not?" Catherine said sadly.

"Yes, it is. It is pointless really. What is to be gained in ignoring a family member, treating them as an inconvenience if they ever speak?"

"I cannot see one, Thomas."

"Then I do not know what is to be done." He laughed, but it did not sound as amused as it did jaded.

"Nothing can be done to improve the circumstances within the family. I know this to be true, for I have tried it and been thwarted on many occasions," she said with a light practicality which had Thomas smiling in earnest again. "But the circumstances of *the afterthoughts* can be improved, but they must improve them for themselves."

"And I take it that we are *the afterthoughts?* You and I?"

"Yes, as harsh as it sounds, it is always prudent to be absolutely honest with oneself." She laughed.

"Then I shall follow your lead." He moved a little closer to her, and yet she did not find his proximity at all oppressive.

In fact, she found it comforting and, still in the spirit of being honest with herself, she admitted that she would not have minded at all if he had closed the gap further still.

"That would be a new experience for me." She laughed. "But I would not seek to put you off, for I should like somebody to follow my lead once in a great while."

“I would not deny any pleasure of yours, My Lady,” he said and tipped his head respectfully. “But how are we to go about it? How ought we *afterthoughts* to improve our circumstances?”

“By making our own little rules and keeping our victories in life a secret.” She felt shy and bold all at once.

Catherine knew what she was offering, and yet she did not feel ashamed. And why should she? All she wanted was a friend, a nice young man that any young woman would be proud to know. If she had to conduct that friendship in secret, then that was the shame of her father for continuing to live in all-pervasive hatred.

“Then you would consent to meet me here again, Catherine? You would do me that great honour?” She realized he was making the question his own, but only to release her from any tendency towards guilt or shame.

What a fine young man Thomas Carlton was, and how much he could have taught his own father, not to mention hers.

“Yes, I would consent to meet you here again without question. I like you very much, Thomas, and can openly state that you are a very fine person against all the odds, just like my brother, Philip.”

“Thank you, Catherine. You have complimented me again, and I have still not returned it.”

“You must not worry, for your friendship in itself is compliment enough.”

Chapter 5

Thomas strode in through the front door of Shawcross Hall, just as he always did. Despite the weeks and weeks of meeting Catherine down by Stromlyn Lake, he still had to fight the urge to come back home more cautiously. He knew, of course, that to be too cautious would be to make himself seem furtive.

“Where have you been?” Pierce came upon him suddenly in the entrance hall as he closed the door behind him.

Thomas was so startled that his mouth fell open, and he stuttered a little before answering.

“Out riding. Why? What is it to you?” He tried to sound annoyed rather than guilty. “And why are you skulking about here pouncing on people?”

“I am not pouncing on people, just you.” Pierce narrowed his dark eyes. “Where did you ride?”

“Out across Colney Beck, why? You ordinarily could not care less where I go.”

“I still do not care, brother. I just wonder where it is you go of late. You seem to be riding out with increasing regularity. Please do not tell me it is the dreary and plain Louisa Ravensthorpe. I do not think Father would like that at all. She has no particular connections and likely would not come with much of a dowry.”

“I think it is a little unfair to call the poor woman dreary and plain.” Thomas was hoping to divert his brother.

He could not imagine that Pierce knew of his special friendship with

Catherine Ambrose, for he would surely have mentioned it if he did. Pierce was not a man who could play a long game, and he would have certainly run to their father with that particular news if he had it.

In that respect, Pierce had changed very little since childhood. He was as determined now to win his father's approval as he had been back then, and Thomas wondered if Pierce would ever grow up enough to realize he was never going to get it.

If the old Duke started bestowing praise, his son would stop trying so hard to win it, and where would be the advantage in that? For a moment, Thomas pitied Pierce and hated their father for how he had raised him.

"Then it *is* her?" Pierce said a little too gleefully for a man of four-and-twenty. "Father will not be pleased at all."

"Well, before you go running to him with tales of things that have never happened, let me spare you the trouble of making a fool of yourself and tell you that I was out riding alone. I have no special friendship with Louisa Ravensthorpe; I defend her merely because what you say is so unkind."

"Unkind?" Pierce scoffed, his dark eyes dancing with the sort of menace that comes over a spiteful boy who is about to pull the wings off a butterfly.

"Yes, unkind." As much as Thomas was confident Pierce knew nothing, the idea of having to put up with any more of his company just to divert him was insupportable.

"Really, you are the weakest of men," Pierce scoffed.

"And you are the most underdeveloped."

“What?”

“That you can find your own humour in childish name calling, playing the superior card because that is the one you have been dealt.”

“You are still jealous that I am to be Duke. After all these years, you cannot take it. You should be used to it by now, being the second son.”

“Oh Pierce, for heaven’s sake.” Thomas shook his head and began to walk away through the immense entrance hall.

He looked up at the dozens of portraits hanging on the wall as he went, many of them former Dukes of Shawcross. He had never, ever wanted to join them in their portraits or their occupation.

“Pierce, look at them.” Thomas stopped, unable to walk away entirely without saying his piece. “Look at the arrogance, the haughty air about them.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The old Dukes, my dear brother. The men you follow. Those you will hang alongside in oil on canvas one day in the far-off future.”

“Arrogant, you say?” Pierce was instantly affronted as if the insult had been aimed at him personally.

“Yes, look at them. Every single one has that air of entitlement as if they were born to be where they are.”

“But they were.”

“That is not exactly what I mean.” Thomas thought for a moment and stared up at his grandfather, the man who had begun the feud

between their family and the Earl of Barford's. "As if they are better by dint of where, when, and to whom they were born."

"They are better. *We* are better," Pierce said and gave Thomas such a look of disdain that he immediately realized he was not part of the *we* who were *better*.

"But do you not see it is all made up. The title, the whole system; it is a game, a folly of men."

"What nonsense is this?" Pierce looked angry, and Thomas knew it was simply because he did not understand any of it; Pierce hated to feel a fool.

"To walk through the world as if you own it is to miss so much of what is around you."

"Nonsense!"

"As you wish," Thomas said and started to walk away again.

"This is envy, plain and simple." Pierce came after him, not yet ready to give up the argument.

"I am not envious of you," Thomas said in a tired, exasperated tone. "I would not be where you are for a Kingdom, never mind a duchy."

"And why, pray tell, is that?"Pierce followed him all the way into the drawing room.

Thomas had not intended to go there; he was simply trying to get away from Pierce. He was relieved, however, to see that the room was otherwise empty. Had their father been present, Pierce would have made much of it, using everything at his disposal to have the Duke side with him. Not to affect Thomas as its aim, but to satisfy his own

need for approval from a man who never bestowed it.

“Because I see the pressure brought to bear upon you, Pierce, and I could not abide it for myself,” Thomas said truthfully.

“You would not be man enough for all of that. It takes a better man to manage it.” Pierce looked self-satisfied as if Thomas had conceded a point.

Pierce had always lagged behind in terms of raw intelligence, and Thomas, every bit as kind as his mother had raised him to be, had never taunted him for it.

“It is not that, Pierce. I could not bear our father’s perpetual interest if I am entirely honest. I could not stand him instructing me on how to be a man in his own image, for I do not like the image of our father.”

“Perhaps I ought to tell him that.”

“Perhaps you ought to grow up. The time for running to father, or nurse, or the governess with tales has long since passed. I do not care to be in competition with you for our father’s good opinion, so you may safely leave me out of things and know that it would not be to your detriment. I am not your competition, am I? As you keep reminding me, you are to be the Duke, and I am not. Can you not just be satisfied with that?”

“I am tired of this conversation now,” Pierce said with a grand air. “I have better things to do than talk nonsense with you, brother.”

“I am very glad to hear it,” Thomas said and smiled before dropping heavily into the armchair nearest the fire.

He heard, rather than saw, his brother leave the room. Such encounters between the two of them had always been very trying but

had become a little more so of late. Not because it was all so pointless, and they never resolved anything between them, but because Thomas wished that things were different.

Now, more than ever, he would have liked a brother who was also a friend. A brother he could confide in and know that his most precious information was safe. He would, in short, like somebody on the earth to talk to about Catherine and his hopes and fears for the future. If only he had a brother he could trust, he might be able to say it all out loud; he might have someone who might see things with fresh eyes; an older brother who could advise him sensibly.

And it would have been practical advice too, something which would have suited Pierce to give. Thomas did not need to mull over matters of the heart, nor wonder out loud if the object of his affection returned his love equally. That much he knew for certain.

In the weeks since they had been meeting at Stromlyn Lake, there had been no doubt in his mind that Catherine felt for him what he felt for her. There was none of the dancing around that seemed to be part and parcel of ordinary courtships.

Catherine had once said it was because they were meeting in secret and at great risk to themselves. In those circumstances, it was clear that each would only do so because of their high regard for the other. To have played coy or remain aloof so as not to give away the upper hand seemed ridiculous in the light of such knowledge.

And that was what he loved most about; her wisdom and gentle confidence. Catherine never blushed or giggled. She always looked him right in the eyes and only laughed if she found something truly amusing. There was no veil hiding the true woman behind, just the woman herself.

It had spurred Thomas on to be the same, to only state his true

thoughts and opinions and to always be himself entirely. It had been hard at first, for he feared, as all men secretly did, that his own character, just as it was, would never be good enough.

But Catherine had shown him that it was and had shown him almost from the very first. It was their honesty which had likely brought them together so close and so fast. He had been meeting her not three weeks when he knew, without the shadow of a doubt, that he was falling in love with her.

And even that seemed like a long time ago; a time when he could still choose to walk away. But that time had passed, and his feelings were so deep now that he could no more walk away than he could will himself to stop breathing.

Catherine had also come to that place in her own feelings, and now, whenever they met, their talk always inexorably turned to the reality of their situation; the truth that they could go no further than they had already gone.

“If we had the luxury of courting in the normal way, Thomas, then we would already be engaged and thinking of our life together,” Catherine had said to him only that morning as they sat on the fallen tree holding hands.

“I know,” he said mournfully, feeling what had become a customary sadness surround him like a cloak. “I think of it all the time.”

“It has made our meetings a little sad, Thomas.”

“But there is still good in it. There is still love, and I still suffer the same glorious excitement as I ride across Colney Beck, knowing I will be with you in minutes. I could not bear to lose you now, even if this is all we ever have.”

“Thomas, I am not leaving you. I would never, ever leave you.” Catherine had become a little tearful, although she was strong and did not allow the tears to fall. “Not willingly,” she finished, and he felt his heart sink.

“Has something happened?” He did not need to elaborate further.

They had often talked of how suddenly either one of them might be forced into matrimony with a spouse of their fathers’ choosing. At first, it had been a lighthearted thing; just something else the two excited young friends had in common.

But as their love had grown, it had become something to be feared. It was the spectre at the feast, ever present, however much one tried to ignore it.

“No, I have heard nothing of any plans of my father’s. But that is not to say he does not make them, for I am sure I would be the last person to hear of it. I have asked Philip from time to time, but I would not want him to grow suspicious of my perpetual questions.”

“Do you really think your father would leave it so long before telling you? I think he does not have any plan at all. At least we can hope for that much.”

“Yes, we can hope. But you must remember that the first I had heard of his intention to marry me away to Francis Mortimer was the morning he had decided to call it off. Before that, I had no knowledge whatsoever.” She had squeezed his hand and turned mournful eyes upon him. “It is not because my father seeks to keep things secret from me, Thomas; it is simply a fact that he thinks it none of my business in the first place. It is not as if he will ask for my opinion or give me the final say on any match he has planned. It is not even a consideration, and he would scoff at the idea of including me in such things.”

“I despise him,” Thomas said truthfully. “I despise them both.”

“Do not let their behaviour taint your soul, Thomas. You are too perfect, too wonderful for that.” Her hazel eyes fixed his, and he felt lost in them for a moment as if none of the rest of it were real somehow.

Her hair, free from the blue bonnet he liked so much, lifted in the breeze, its soft tendrils swaying gently around her face. He reached out to touch her smooth, creamy skin, and when she smiled at him with so much love, he pulled her to him and kissed her.

It was a simple kiss, nothing too passionate that might have frightened her or turned her away from him, but it was the most wonderful thing, nonetheless.

“You are the perfect one, my love,” he said when he drew away.

As he had ridden back the way he always went, Thomas had thought of nothing but the kiss. It really had been wonderful, and yet, at the same time, it seemed to fill him with such great sadness. It was like a beautiful reminder of everything they were denied; the life that could never be theirs.

With a sigh, Thomas stared into the flames of the fire. How glad he was that Pierce had been diverted on this occasion, but he knew he would have to be more and more careful. If Stromlyn Lake were all they could ever have, he would do nothing to see that taken away from them.

Chapter 6

“How wonderful to eat breakfast in peace,” Catherine said as she nibbled at a slice of bread and butter. “By which I mean how nice it is to be able to speak freely and as much as we want. I suppose ours is a sort of noisy peace, Philip.” She laughed, feeling every bit as carefree as she sounded.

“Barford Hall feels like a different place altogether when our father is absent, does it not?”

Philip smiled broadly. “Yes, it does. And the sun is already shining so well; it is as if it knows too.”

“We must make the most of this next week, Catherine. Heaven knows when our father will go away like this again.” He grimaced. “And for an awful while, I thought I would have to go with him. At least I have been spared that.”

“It looks as if we are both free, Philip. For the next few days at any rate.” Catherine set down her bread and butter and stared contentedly off at the patch of peeling green paint above the window. She was about to mention it to Philip when he spoke again.

“Yes, and that small taste of freedom is bittersweet, is it not? It is a reminder of what we do not have.”

“It is,” she said in something of a daze as she continued to stare at the paint. “I wonder if it is always a good thing to look at the life you might have if things were different. It makes us all the sadder.”

She knew, of course, that she was not talking about a few days clear of their father’s dreadful presence at Barford Hall.

She had thought of Thomas' wonderful kiss every day since he had given it. It had been the most wonderfully loving moment of her life, something which took her breath away with excitement when she thought of it.

But that excitement was always replaced with the idea that he would never be her husband, that his kisses would one day be bestowed upon a woman of his father's choosing.

When Philip talked of bittersweet, Catherine knew first-hand what he meant.

"I know that our father is away, but you must still be careful," Philip said in a near whisper.

"Philip?" Catherine turned her attention away from the peeling paint and looked at him sharply.

She had the sudden, awful feeling that she had been discovered, even though his words could have meant anything at all. "What? What do you mean?" Her heart was pounding.

"Forgive me, Catherine, for I am not prying into your life for the sake of it. I am just urging you to be more cautious."

"Cautious?" Catherine dared say nothing else, in case she gave herself away unnecessarily.

She knew now, of course, that Philip knew about Thomas. Or at least he suspected if he did not know for certain.

"Thomas Carlton," he said simply.

"But how did you know?" she said and felt her cheeks flaming uncomfortably hot as tears rolled down them.

“Please, do not upset yourself, Catherine. I do not mean to give your secret away, nor do I seek to judge you for your choices.”

“But how did you find out?” Catherine felt a deep sense of panic; if Philip knew, who else did?

“I did not find out. I did not know it for certain until now. But I had suspected, and I just wanted to tell you to be careful.”

“What gave me away?”

“The Earl of Lysander’s ball last week,” Philip said and reached for her shaking hand. “It was just a look between you, nothing more. Nothing that anybody else would have seen. But it immediately made me think of how regular your walks have become, and how you are out of the house longer than used to be your custom.”

“And you put the whole thing together from that?” Catherine did not know if she was relieved or dismayed. Was Philip just very clever, or would it be obvious to others?

“And I *know* you, Catherine. I have seen a change in you of late. Happy at first, but I had come to think that you had something of a great burden you were carrying; a deep worry.”

“Yes, I do. I could never have foreseen how deep my feelings would grow.” He handed her a handkerchief, and she dabbed her eyes. “But I should have done. I should never have walked so blindly into heartbreak. I ought to have seen the consequences.”

“Are your feelings for him really so strong?” Philip looked at her in such a kindly manner that her eyes filled with tears again.

“He is such a fine young man, Philip. Really, he is nothing like our

father would have him described."

"*Nobody* is as our father would describe them." Philip laughed, offering his sister a few moments' respite from the trauma of discovery. "And I have always found Thomas Carlton to be polite."

"You know him?" Catherine said brightly.

"No, we have never talked. But he has acknowledged me with a smile for as long as I can remember. Careful always, I am bound to say, that he is seen by neither our father or his own."

"Yes, that was always my experience too."

"But Pierce Carlton is another matter altogether." Philip grimaced. "He is formed in the way of his father; our father also. He is exactly what one would expect him to be. No doubt he is exactly as our father wishes I would have been."

"I am grateful that you are not, Philip. I would want you always to be the man you are, not your father's son."

"Thank you." He smiled. "We have always been friends, have we not?"

"Always. Nothing has broken us apart. Not Mama passing away so long ago, and not out father's influence." She paused and sighed thoughtfully. "And I hope not my choices either. I hope this will never come between us. I love him, you see."

"This will not come between us, Catherine. I will never be your enemy. For heaven's sake, our friendship is the longest that either one of us has had." He broke off, and his emotion was clear.

"Thank you, Philip, for I do not know how I would walk through this world without you."

“But you must be careful,” he said and cleared his throat to steady his voice.“If I have come to this conclusion, what is there to say that others will not?”

“That is my fear.”

“And what if father promises you to someone else? He is bound to do it sooner or later.”

“I know, and I cannot bear it. I would have to leave Thomas behind.” Catherine lowered her head. “I cannot even think of it. I shall never love any man but Thomas Carlton, and I would rather die than be promised to another.”

“Catherine, no, please do not say that.” Philip looked stricken. “I despise myself for making you so upset, but we cannot shy away from these things. They are real; they are coming.”

“I know.” She sobbed miserably. “At times, I wish I had never met Thomas. Nothing would have changed, and I would be looking at life in the same, resigned way I always have. But I would not go back, you see. I would rather have this tiny slice of my life lived in love. If it is all I am ever to have, then I shall have to make it enough.”

At that moment, one of the maids came into the room. Both Philip and Catherine started badly, and the maid mumbled an apology before she hastily curtseyed and fled from the room.

“Oh dear, I wonder what she thinks,” Catherine said. “And what she will be telling the rest of the servants when she returns below stairs.”

“That we are in some quarrel or other and that I have made you weep, I have no doubt.” Philip gave a mirthless laugh. “But it is something as simple as this which could expose you to the world, Catherine. A

simple piece of gossip or the conjecture of others. That is all it takes. One person might hear a piece of gossip which suggests discord, but that might be a person who has already seen a look pass between the two of you at a ball. That is how these things get started."

Catherine nodded mutely and thought of the Earl of Lysander's ball. It had been such a large, lavish affair that there seemed to be almost too many people to pay her any heed whatsoever.

She had felt light and excited as she walked into the great ballroom with her father and brother, looking all around for any sign of Thomas.

Her father, she knew, would be less aggressive and awkward, even though the Duke of Shawcross was undoubtedly there. It was a large enough event that the two men need not even look upon each other, and so her father had relaxed a little from what he had been at Lord Vinton's much smaller gathering.

Seeing that her father was not quite so vigilant had made her somewhat more confident. Perhaps she would even manage a few moments' conversation with her love.

The Earl had fallen into an immediate conversation with three of his acquaintances, all of whom had hurried dutifully over the moment they saw him enter the ballroom. And Philip, a secretively beleaguered look on his face that only Catherine would recognize, dutifully stood at his father's side and partook of the conversation.

Catherine was, as always, so easily forgotten that she thought she could have walked right over to Thomas and nobody would see a thing. Not that she would dream of such a thing, but her father's dismissal of her was always so complete.

Thomas was standing some feet away from his own father and

brother, engaged in conversation with a young man Catherine recognised but did not know. Thomas looked pleased to be in his company, instead of suffering his father who, by Thomas' own accounts to her, seemed every bit as boorish and pig-headed as the Earl.

Catherine studied him secretly and contentedly. He was dressed formally in black breeches and finely cut tailcoat. He wore black knee boots, rather than the white stockings and shining black shoes his brother had chosen to wear, and Catherine thought the look a far more pleasing one. His waistcoat was a pale cream and fitted him to perfection.

In contrast with his brother once again, Thomas wore a white shirt with a simple necktie. Pierce, on the other hand, wore a shirt with such an elaborately fashioned necktie that she wondered how he would manage to eat anything all evening.

And that was the difference; Pierce always seemed to announce his status in some way or other. Thomas was simply a content and confident man who had no need of such devices. And that was why she loved him so much.

Catherine smiled absent-mindedly as she watched Thomas from across the room. It was one of those moments when she forgot all the troubles, the dreaded outcomes, and simply enjoyed being in love. She was a young woman in love with a handsome young man, and that was all there was to it.

When he looked away from his companion for a moment, it was clear that he spotted Catherine immediately. His face erupted into a smile that he could not control, and it was some moments before he came to his senses.

When he did, Thomas gave her the tiny, almost imperceptible nod he

always gave her now when they were in public. That wonderful, secret acknowledgement that meant so much to her.

And that must have been it; the moment when her adoring brother had looked up from the dull company in which he found himself and saw his sister's eyes locked on those of Thomas Carlton.

"Oh, Philip, whatever am I to do." Catherine, brought back to the here and now by her own sadness, looked at her brother miserably.

"I wish I had some wise words for you, Catherine. I wish I had some plan by which you could be safe and happy for the rest of your life, and it will trouble me forever that I do not."

"I love him so much. I cannot stop meeting with him, not yet."

"I know. And perhaps that is all you can do for now. But you must be careful in future. You must not be so open in your admiration of Thomas, or you will give yourself away."

"Yes, if our father saw …"

"He would not even notice, Catherine. He would never discover this by use of his own senses. He does not pay attention for long enough, or hard enough, to discern such a thing for himself. But he has his men, his little spies, the sycophants who hover around him and would seek to have you married to their own sons. They must be watched for, mistrusted at every level."

"Yes, you are right." Catherine was beginning to feel a little better.

It was true that nothing had been solved, but it was clear that Philip was not about to insist she abandon Thomas or her love for him.

"But you must remember what sort of a man our father is. He might

not discover it for himself, but if he ever found it out, I fear for what he would do to you." Philip paused, and Catherine shuddered. "You know how he behaves when he thinks he has been wronged in some way. If he found out about your regard for Thomas Carlton, he would see it as an absolute betrayal. His ego would be all that his heart would hear, and it would force him into something dreadful. And it would not be temporary, Catherine, for you know yourself how long he can carry a resentment, even the smallest of them."

"Years," Catherine said with a rueful smile.

"No, forever," Philip said with certainty. "Think about it; when have you ever known our father to forgive anybody?"

"Never. I have never seen him relent in any matter," Catherine said, her mouth going suddenly dry.

"And it would be the same for you. Perhaps even worse because he would see it as betrayal from a family member; one of his own children." Philip stopped abruptly. "Forgive me; I did not mean to frighten you. But you must promise me that you will have a care in future."

"I promise."

Chapter 7

Just weeks later, Catherine wished she had stuck more rigidly to her brother's advice. But as she stood in her father's study, her legs feeling weak and as if they might not support her for much longer, she wondered what else she could have done.

Catherine and Thomas had varied the times and days of their meetings, although they had always met at Stromlyn Lake. But after her talk with Philip, Catherine had urged Thomas to take different routes between Stromlyn Lake and Shawcross Hall, so as not to develop an obvious routine that might lead to their discovery.

She was so sure that she had covered every possibility, disallowing him to smile at her in public, although brief eye contact was something that they had continued to make.

And all of it broke her heart; why should she have to hide her love and pretend not to know Thomas? All for the sake of their selfish, antagonistic fathers, not to mention the immature, territorial grandfathers who had caused it all in the first place.

"Of all the men," her father said, his voice so low she was almost more afraid.

She had heard him bellow with predictable regularity throughout her entire life, but it was always the quiet voice she feared. The quiet voice was not the threat of something awful to come; it was a promise. This was her father conserving energy because he knew he had a long and full day of punishing ahead of him.

"Why him? Why the son of the Duke of Shawcross? Have I not kept you away from them?"

Catherine knew better than to speak, even to respond to his questions. All she could sensibly do was hang her head; that was what her father was expecting. That was what he was looking for as her response. Not an explanation or a reasonable excuse. Not even the truth. None of it. All he wanted was total and utter capitulation.

He wanted his enemy to prostrate herself at his feet and declare she had been beaten. And she *was* his enemy, absolutely his enemy. There was no doubt about that in Catherine's mind, and the only question was, would it ever change?

"And because I have been so careful to keep you away from them, I can only imagine that you have gone out of your way to consort with him. Something like that does not happen by accident; it is decided upon." He paced up and down the floorboards of the large study.

It was an austere room, always a little cold even if there was a fire in the grate, and it enjoyed so little natural daylight that it might as well not have had a window in it at all.

And even though it was so ill-favoured in trapping the sun's rays, every wall had been clad in dark oak paneling, making the room seem darker and more miserable still.

Her father's desk was made of mahogany and was so large that it would easily have seated six people around it for dinner. There were papers everywhere across it, just strewn here and there and not even piled neatly, leading Catherine to absently wonder how it was he ever managed to get anything done.

His approach to his estate papers reminded her of his approach to his dinner plate. It was haphazard at best, and a downright mess at worst. There was nothing at all refined about her father, nothing to redeem him whatsoever. In everything, he was like a bull in a china shop. Every aspect of his life was something to be barged through, knocked

out of the way, bullied into line.

And Catherine knew that she was nothing more than the latest thing to be marched across and beaten. She was going to be dealt with, one way or another, and all that remained to be seen was the method that her father would employ.

Catherine had no idea how it was her father had found out about her and Thomas. She knew with absolute certainty that Philip had not said anything. When their father had barged into the breakfast room that morning and ripped Catherine from her seat by her upper arm, Philip had looked shocked by it.

He was as shocked as she was, and he was out of his seat in a heartbeat. He reared up against his father, and only Catherine's protestations and heartfelt entreaties that he should remain calm had kept him from doing something regrettable.

That had been more than an hour ago, and her father had yet to let her speak or get to the part where her punishment was made known. Perhaps he did not yet know how he would punish her; perhaps it was all too soon for that.

But it was clear that the Earl of Barford had only received the dreaded information that morning. It could only have come to him in the moments before he had burst into the breakfast room and seized her.

Poor Philip must have been suffering agonies wondering what was happening to her, how frightened she must be. But curiously, Catherine did not feel frightened. She simply felt exhausted as if the anxiety of the last few months had finally caught up with her and chosen that moment to make itself known.

More than anything in the world, Catherine wanted to sit down. There was a small, hard wooden chair in front of her father's mahogany

desk, but she knew better than to sit down in it. It would do her no good to even ask. Her comfort was very rarely a consideration, and it most certainly would not be one now that he had found her out and was so very angry with her.

But how? How had he found out? She racked her brains and felt sure that she had not been seen with Thomas anywhere. They had taken so much care of late, neither one of them taking risks at all.

What did it matter who had given them away? In the end, what difference would it make? None. Knowing the identity of the person who had given away her secret would not make her punishment any the less.

“So, since it is clear to me that you went out of your way to choose this young man, I can only assume that you did so as a means of betraying me. You seek to make a fool of me before the entire county, do you not?” He turned and glared at her, and Catherine wondered if he was expecting her to answer. “Well?” he said, and his voice had grown a little louder.

“No, I did not,” she said quietly.

“You did not seek to make a fool of me? But surely with your very behaviour, to make a fool of me was something that could hardly be avoided. So, it was something that you knew would come to me, you scheming little minx.”

He had begun to pace again, and it was clear that her part in the proceedings was over, at least for the time being.

Catherine began to feel hot and a little lightheaded, and she was certain that she could feel her body swaying just a little from side to side as if she were going off balance. It was true that she had taken nothing to eat that morning, given that her father had burst into the

breakfast room before she had taken a single bite.

But she knew that it was not simple hunger that was making her feel so weak and unwell. It was the fear of what was coming. Not the fear of what would happen to her, as such, but the fear of how life would move on from that point. And she knew, with absolute certainty, that whatever life held for her in the future, Thomas Carlton would not be part of it.

As the thought came to her, a little noise escaped her throat, a squashed cry of pain. Her father paused in his determined pacing and turned sharply to glare at her. His face was becoming red, his anger slowly working itself up to a tangible, dreadful thing.

“What was that?” he said gruffly. “What right have you to cry out? If anyone has a right to cry out in anguish, girl, it is me. After all, am I not the one who has been wronged? And not only wronged but wronged by my own kin? The very flesh and blood I gave life to!” He was whipping himself up into a frenzy again and, when he began to pace once more, Catherine held her breath.

“How long has this been going on?” He took her off-guard with his question, for he seemed to have asked it quite rationally. “How long have you been meeting with Thomas Carlton?”

“Five months, Sir,” she said in a tiny, strangled voice.

“Five months?” he said slowly and deliberately. “For five long months, you have been content to humiliate me with this vile association? And in all that time, did you not once think of your duty to me? Did you not once think of the evil betrayal you were perpetrating? For make no mistake, girl, you have betrayed me. I have given you everything in the world, everything you could possibly want or desire, and you have seen fit to go behind my back and throw everything I have ever done for you back in my face. What would *you* do with somebody who

did that to you?" he said and continued to pace. "What punishment would you lay out for somebody who had treated you with such contempt?"

Catherine could feel herself growing a little faint and blinked rapidly to stave it off. He had reached the subject of punishment much sooner than she had been expecting, and it had taken her by surprise.

She felt coldness in the pit of her stomach as if it had been filled with ice, and yet her arms and legs seemed to be hot and cold in turns. There was a pricking at the back of her neck, and she felt clammy with fear.

The pricking was causing a great irritation, and she wanted to reach up and lay a hand on the back of her neck. She knew, however, she ought not to move a muscle.

If she did, it would just draw his attention to her and make him all the angrier. All she could do was stand there and hope that she did not keel over and that she would instead brave it all, whatever was coming.

"Well, I have decided. I cannot have a member of own family betraying me as you have. I am the Earl of Barford, a man of great importance, not a man whose daughter, his very own daughter, would go against him," he said, and for a moment she almost inappropriately laughed, for he had straightened up a little in his own description of himself and had puffed his chest out somewhat proudly. He looked ridiculous, and it was certainly not the moment for any sort of self-congratulation. "And so it is clear to me that I have only one course of action. I cannot have a traitor under my roof, not even if she is my own daughter. *Especially* if she is my own daughter!" He seemed to falter for a moment before correcting himself. "And so, I am going to disown you."

“Disown me?” Catherine said in a strangled sob.

Of all the punishments she had expected, being disowned had not been one of them. In truth, it had not even occurred to her that her father would say such a thing. She had expected that she would be struck, bruised even. She had known that she would be disallowed Thomas Carlton’s company ever again, that was a foregone conclusion. And she had even thought that he would instantly marry her away to whichever young man was currently floating on the periphery of his mind as potentially useful to him at a later date.

“You seem a little dismayed,” he said and turned, giving her a bitter, cruel smile.

“What do you mean *disowned*, father?” she said, feeling all the more distressed in the face of her father’s apparent amusement.

“I mean that you are no longer welcome to live under this roof. You will never live under this roof again.”

“You are throwing me away?” she said and was unable to hide the accusation in her tone.

“Do you think you deserve better?” he scoffed.

“Yes, I do,” she said, thinking that she suddenly had nothing to lose. “I am your daughter, and it is unthinkable that you would cast me aside for one mistake.”

“Please, do not sound so hard done to,” he said dismissively. “I am not making you homeless; I am simply sending you away. Just because you will never sleep under this roof again does not mean that you will not have *somewhere* to sleep.”

“And where am I to go?” she said, her voice wavering badly with fear

and desolation. “Where am I to live?”

“I am sending you up north, Catherine. You will, from this point forward, live with your aunt.”

“My aunt?” Catherine said, not aware that she had an aunt in the North of England.

“I have a sister in Derbyshire. I intend to write to her this morning and tell her that I am sending you up to her. As soon as I have her reply, you will leave. And I will never look upon your traitorous face again.”

“You would be happy never to see me again, Father?”

“What else do you expect from me?”

“I suppose from a man who has always treated me as if I were no more important to him than an old piece of furniture I expect very little. I should perhaps have easily expected that you would have no more compunction scraping me out of your life as you would scraping uneaten food into a pig pen.”

“I think you would be well advised to mind what you say.”

“Why? You are casting me aside forever; what more can you do to me? If I am not to have my say now, then when?”

“You do not get to have a say, not after what you did.”

“Be honest, Father. I did not get to have a say before that. There are times when you have not even acknowledged me when we have sat to eat at the same table. And if I am crying now, Father, it is not for fear of never seeing your face again because, in all of this, that is the only relief.”

“I have told you to be quiet.”

“I will not be quiet,” she snapped angrily, the weakness in her legs suddenly disappearing and an urge to strike out at her father so very strong. “My only regret in leaving this place is not seeing my brother again. And my only regret in leaving the county is that I will not see Thomas Carlton again because I have never met a finer man in all my life.”

“You will not talk of him in this house.

“Thomas Carlton is a man, a real man. He is not some fool who cannot see beyond a petty disagreement between his ancestors. He is clever and wise and kind; and I will love him until the day I die.”

By the time she had finished, Catherine was shouting. She had never shouted at her father in all her life; in fact, she had hardly ever shouted at all. And once she had begun, she could not imagine what on earth could stop her.

That was, of course, until her father struck her so hard across the face that she fell backward. Catherine landed hard on the floor, every ounce of air being forcibly propelled from her lungs.

As she lay on the floor wondering if she would ever be able to fill her lungs again, if she would ever take another breath, she was glad of one thing, and one thing only; she had finally spoken out in defiance of her father.

Chapter 8

Some days later, Catherine was sitting alone in the breakfast room staring at the small patch of peeling green paint and wondering if she would be able to eat a single bite of the food she had laid out on her plate.

The closer it was coming to the time for her to leave Barford Hall forever, the more she began to take notice of her day-to-day life there. This was to be her last but one breakfast in that room, and she very much doubted that she could manage a single thing the following day before leaving.

“It is only me,” Philip said gently when he walked in through the door causing her to look up sharply. “Fear not, our father is still in his bed and likely will be for some time yet. He filled himself with strong liquor last night after dinner.”

“Pity he does not drink himself to death,” Catherine said angrily and was true to say that she meant it wholeheartedly.

“Perhaps one day he shall,” Philip said and smiled before sitting down next to her.

“Are you not eating, Philip?” she said and looked over at the heavily laden sideboard of platters of hot breakfast food.

“Forgive me, Catherine, but as the time draws near for you to leave, the fact is I cannot eat at all.”

“Philip, you must not make yourself ill over it all. I could not bear it.”

“I cannot bear any of this, Catherine,” he said, and she looked at his young, handsome face and felt her heart break to see his eyes filling

with tears. “I cannot bear the thought that I will never see you again.”

“We will see each other again, Philip. Our day will come.”

“Only when he is dead,” Philip said firmly. “He will not relent in this, Catherine. He is most determined, even all these days later, that you will not be welcome under this roof again. And he has demanded that I cut all ties with you, refusing to give me the address to which he sends you.”

“Then you cannot even write to me? I am to be completely removed from my family then, am I?”

“I will do everything in my power to find out where this aunt lives. Believe me that I will not rest until I have sent my first letter to you.”

“I do not know how you are to achieve such a thing, Philip. Neither one of us even knew that father had a sister in the North, nor even what her name is. She might well not even be an *Ambrose*, for it seems likely that she would be married.”

“I will not rest until I find it, even if I have to search through Father’s study. It must be written down there somewhere, in an old letter or something of that nature. He must surely have maintained some contact with his sister over the years to be able to write to her with the news that he was sending you to Derbyshire. Since you are going, it is clear that she has written back and agreed to it all.”

“I wonder what Derbyshire is like,” Catherine said miserably. “I wonder if it is as pretty as Hertfordshire.”

“I am told that the peak country is very beautiful,” Philip said in an attempt to cheer her. “Perhaps you will get to explore a little.”

“And perhaps I will be kept a prisoner by an evil aunt. Perhaps I am

only being sent to her because she is cruel and our father thinks that a fitting punishment for one such as me."

"Catherine, there is no reason to think that our aunt is cruel."

"She is our father's sister, Philip. If she is even just a little like him, that will be too much to bear. To be separated from you only to find that I am to be kept a prisoner in the North and treated cruelly by my father's sister will be more than I can manage. It is all too much, you see. The punishment does not fit the crime because, in the end, there is no crime. As much as I am in pain for all that is to come, I am more in pain for what I am to lose. And I include Thomas in that, and I always shall. His loss is as great a blow to my heart as the loss of you is, and that is my crime. Falling in love is my crime. But the awful thing is, the evil, vile thing is, that Thomas and I were kept apart by two angry, spiteful old men. None of this need have been, none of it."

"I know, and I do not blame you for any of it."

"Even when you tried to warn me?"

"I only warned you because I did not want you to come to harm. But there is no blame in any of this unless it is towards our father. He is, in everything, to be blamed. I thought I despised him before, but I cannot have done so for what I feel now is truly almost murderous. I will never forgive him for what he is doing to you, for in doing it he is hurting me also."

"I cannot bear to think of you here alone with him, living day after day with just his company here."

"I will survive it, Catherine. My loathing and anger will be my constant companions; they will keep me going."

"Oh, Philip, do not let him harden your heart. You are a good man, a

tender-hearted human being, and it would finish me entirely if that changed."

"My heart will remain tender in all the important ways, I promise." He smiled and lowered his voice to a whisper. "In fact, in one very important way."

"What do you mean?"

"You will not leave Hertfordshire without saying goodbye to Thomas Carlton," Philip said in a voice that was barely audible.

"I am to have a final meeting with Thomas?" she said, her eyes filling with grateful tears. "But where? When?"

"I managed to get a message to Thomas asking him to meet me. It was not an easy thing for him because his father has also been made aware of your friendship," Philip said, and she wondered once again who it was had given them away. "But he met me nonetheless, and I told him of your plight. It is true to say that the devastation I saw upon his face was not only genuine but gut-wrenching. If you never have a moment's love again in this life, know that you had the very best from Thomas Carlton. I could see it."

"Oh, Philip. If only things could have been different."

"He knows that tonight is your last night here, his only chance to say goodbye." Philip looked instinctively over his shoulder only to find that they were still alone. "I have shown him the best way to come into the estate at night, and I have seen to it that the door to the unused lodge is unlocked. I will help you get out of the house when it is dark, and you may spend whatever time you care to in his company. I will not hover, and I will not wait for you; you must make your own way back to the house."

“I have no fear of it, Philip. I have no fear of making my way back in. As long as I can get to the lodge and spend my last hours there with him, I ask for nothing else in this life.”

And so it was, a little after midnight, that Philip came to her chamber and found her sitting fully dressed, waiting for her opportunity.

They crept through the house hand-in-hand and, finally finding themselves outside, tore off across the grounds at a run, not stopping until they had reached the cover of the trees beyond. When they finally reached the deserted little lodge that was in such great need of repair, she stopped and gripped Philip’s hand once again.

“Is he here?” she said, feeling the very worst of her fears and imagining that Thomas had never made it out of Shawcross Hall at all.

“Yes, I can see the vaguest light through the window, look,” he said and pointed. “He has a candle.”

“Philip, I cannot thank you enough for this. My heart shall break anyway, but perhaps the break will be all the easier for having been able to say goodbye. I shall never forget what you have done for me this night.”

“Go on inside, sister. Take this last slice of happiness, and do not waste a moment of it,” he said and kissed her forehead before turning to leave.

She let herself into the little lodge and stood as still as a statue for a moment simply staring at Thomas. And Thomas, for his part, seemed also to be rooted to the spot, unable to move as he stared at her helplessly.

“Thomas, I am so very sorry,” she said and, before she had even finished speaking, he had crossed the room and pulled her into his

arms.

“There is nothing on this earth for you to be sorry for, Catherine. You have done nothing wrong, neither one of us has.” He held her tightly to him, and she felt safe for the first time in days. “I just cannot bear this, Catherine. I cannot think how to go on with life here in Hertfordshire without you.”

“Then Philip has told you that I am to go to Derbyshire to live with my aunt?” she said, sniffing loudly as her tears flowed.

“He has, although he declares he does not know where exactly.”

“It is true, neither one of us even knew that my father had a sister.” She sniffed. “And what of you? What is your father going to do? Please tell me that he is not going to punish you as mine is punishing me?”

“He has discovered that you are to be sent away, Catherine, and he is pleased in the knowledge that that is punishment enough. There could be no greater punishment to give me than to deny me your society. To live without your beautiful face and your wonderful, wise words, is as a death sentence to me. What more could my father do? And I think he knew it. It is enough to him that I am broken.”

“You must not be broken, Thomas. You are young, and you have a life ahead of you. You must not allow bitterness to take you, not ever. Do not let it fester in your heart as our fathers have done for so many years; as their fathers before them did. We are different, Thomas. Have we not proved that by getting this far?”

“Yes, we have. We have lived these last months in love, and there is nothing more wonderful in the world than that. I cannot believe that I had become discontent; that I wanted so much more, especially now when I would give my last drop of blood to be able to go on as we

were forever. How content I would be now with just one meeting a week, just an hour of your company. It is true that we do not ever know what it is we have until it is taken away from us. How precious that time was, Catherine. I will never regret these last months with you, for they have been the only days of my life to make sense to me, to feel real and true."

"If only it could have gone on forever, Thomas. If only we could have been left in peace to continue in our secretive world. If only we had not been given away. And even now, I do not know who did it."

"It was my own brother, Pierce," Thomas said flatly. "He has mistrusted me for some while, and I did not credit him with any intelligence at all. But he has carefully followed me, intent upon discovering the truth. It was my brother who wrote to your father to give him the news and my brother who spoke to my own father on that same day."

"But why would he do such a thing?"

"It is hard for you to understand, given that your own brother is such a fine man. But my brother is weak and clamours daily for our father's approval. This was not so much to spite me as to win him the regard of my father. And even in that, he has failed, for my father treats him the same as he ever did."

"Then it was all for nothing," Catherine said and fought hard to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

"Let us not talk about our families for a moment longer. Let us not waste these last hours together, my darling Catherine. I will be gone from here before the sun comes up, as you must be. Let us spend this time speaking of the day when we will be reunited, for one day, let us hope, that will come."

“It is a wonderful dream, Thomas, and is something I will hold tightly to in my darkest hours. Even though we shall be parted by so many miles, by so much rough ground, when I close my eyes at night, I will see your face. I will imagine you as if you are as close to me as you are now, and in my heart, you *will* be.”

“And I will do the same, Catherine, and that way we shall be together in our hearts forever.”

Chapter 9

Even as the carriage slowed at the road signs for Little Hayfield, still Catherine was not sure they had reached their destination. Her father's driver, whilst he had been as polite and amiable as ever, was clearly under strict instructions to give her little or no information about the precise location of her new home.

Before they had even made it as far as the Midlands, Catherine had stopped asking. She knew she was making the man uncomfortable, and it would be he, rather than Catherine, who would eventually have to return to Barford Hall and her father.

She understood why he could not risk it, for if her father suspected the man of telling her anything, he would very likely lose his position without the promise of a reference. That was how her father operated, and all his servants knew it.

Catherine decided not to put the man under any obligation to her other than to get her to her destination safely. And realizing it, the driver was clearly relieved.

Catherine was aware that they had been in the Peak District for some time, and she had been awestruck by the sheer size of it. Not only its size but its extraordinary remoteness.

There were towns, busy little places, but it did not take long for the carriage to drive straight through them and back into the wilds of the hills once more.

The northern part of Derbyshire was so different from the flat, rolling meadows of Hertfordshire. There were hills in Hertfordshire, of course, but there was nothing to rival the hills and peaks she had seen in this new landscape.

It was a breathtaking scene, sometimes lush, green, and inviting, but other times harsh, windswept, rugged, and remote. It seemed to Catherine that there would always be something to look at there, and the idea of it had transported her for a while, taking her away from her fears and cares as she studied all that passed by her carriage window.

The journey from Hertfordshire had already taken several days, and they had stopped at various coaching inns en route so they might rest the horses overnight.

At first, Catherine had felt very vulnerable. She had never travelled anywhere alone before, not even nearer to home. Her driver was good company enough, and she was sure that he would have protected her had she needed him to, but his presence did not stop her feeling conspicuous; a young woman who was obviously travelling without her family or a chaperone of any kind.

She had felt a little humiliated by it, in the beginning, suffering the barely concealed glances of others as she had taken meals at coaching inns and other hostelries. But after the first few days, she had grown accustomed to the enquiring looks and had found it a little easier to ignore them as time had passed.

Catherine thought it likely that her father would have been well aware of her discomfort in it all, but as in all other things, he did not care. Perhaps it was a further act of punishment, a last reminder of the power he had over her.

As Catherine stared out at a vast, grass-covered hill, she thought once more of the strange relief at the idea that she would never have to look upon her father's face again. Even if everything else in her uncertain future terrified her, she at least had that small mercy to fortify herself with.

The carriage had drawn to a halt at the side of the road, and Catherine fought the urge to lower the window and listen as the driver jumped down and approached a well-dressed man just a few feet away. She could hear nothing but mumbled conversation, and seeing the animated pointing and explaining that the man was doing, Catherine realized that her driver was asking for final directions.

So, Little Hayfield was to be her home, was it?

With a sigh, she turned her attention back to the huge green hill. It was so wide that she could not see where it ended, and she thought it rather more a mass of land than a distinct hill. She could see a pathway snaking this way and that along its steep incline and thought that on such a sunny day, it seemed rather an inviting place.

The sky was blue with not a cloud anywhere, and the green of the hill stood out against its brightness. For a moment, Catherine wondered if she would ever be permitted to walk along that snaking pathway and make her way to the top of that broad mass. Or would she simply be a prisoner somewhere, never allowed out on her own again to enjoy the beautiful scenery around her?

Suddenly, Catherine felt the debilitating fear that had overtaken her more than once on her long journey. As much as she tried to take things as they came to her, not to assume anything at all, she could not help wondering how much her aunt would resemble her father.

They were brother and sister after all, and Catherine knew that she would be naive not to expect some measure of cruelty from the woman. And even if she were not cruel, surely she could not be pleased to have a young woman, a stranger despite their relationship, foisted upon her indefinitely. Whatever way she looked at it, Catherine must surely be an imposition.

Hearing the driver's heels clicking along the narrow stone pavement, she looked over to see him hastening back to the carriage. Her palms were clammy, and her breathing was becoming a little ragged as she realized that her journey was coming to an end.

She was here in Little Hayfield in the Peak District of Derbyshire for good or ill, and there was no turning back now. And where could she turn back to? There was nowhere else for her to go in all the world. Her father would not have her, and so it was a fact that Hertfordshire could never be her home again.

She closed her eyes tightly when she felt the familiar prickling of hot tears begin to sting again. Catherine did not want to cry now, not so close to meeting the woman who was to be her jailer. It was too soon to give away any advantage and make herself look weak before her father's sister.

But the tears would not stop, and so all she could do was keep her eyes closed and hope to stem them. With her eyes closed, her mind's eye seemed to open, bringing to her once again the dreadful image of her brother's devastated face.

His handsome fairness had been reddened with the effort to contain his emotions in those last terrible moments before she had left Barford Hall for the last time. As he had embraced her tightly, Catherine had felt the little tremors that ran through him like spasms and knew that he was struggling to hold back his own tears.

Catherine had never seen her brother cry since he was a little boy, and the idea that Philip, the man, was about to be reduced to weeping almost tore her heart out. How could any of it be true? How could any of it really be happening? How could her father think she was so bad that this dreadful heartbreak was a fitting punishment?

She had felt hot and sick, her emotions swaying wildly from the

deepest sadness to the vilest hatred. She would never forgive her father for what he had done, even if he one day allowed her to return. That he would hurt his own children in such a way was unforgivable, for there was no circumstance on this earth that could justify it.

As Catherine had been about to climb into the carriage, her father had finally appeared. She had not seen him all morning when she and Philip had sat silently in the breakfast room, holding hands and eating nothing. In the end, she had thought that she would never see him again, and in truth did not care much about it.

But he strode out of the great entrance and down the steps, and she had thought that he was about to approach the carriage and speak to her. However, he did not even look in her direction and continued past the carriage and towards the stables as if on some matter of business there.

Catherine knew him of old and knew that the whole thing was nothing but an act. He had timed his exit from the hall to coincide with her final moments, and he had done so to let her know that she would not be missed.

This was the Earl of Barford's way of dismissing his daughter, of telling her that she was already nothing more than a distant memory. She was done; finished.

She was not upset by his appalling behaviour; she was simply made angrier by it. Her determination never to forgive him was made all the firmer by her belief that her father was nothing better than a spoiled, arrogant child.

With the carriage door closed, she stared desolately out of the window to where Philip stood. She could see that he was barely holding himself together, and she wished that the driver would quickly pull away and leave her brother to his grief.

Philip was a proud young man and would need his privacy to come to terms with his loss. And she knew that he would never have her see him in tears, even at such a moment. When the driver rattled the reins, she gave her brother one last look.

She smiled bravely, and Philip winked. The idea that she would never see him wink at her again in that silly, secret way of theirs, was the final straw. There was only time for her to wink back and nod sadly before the carriage drew away, and she finally dissolved into painful, chest-racking sobs.

Catherine reached into her velvet drawstring purse to retrieve a handkerchief and gently dabbed her eyes, not wanting to rub the tender skin to redness in the moments before she met her aunt for the first time.

The carriage pulled away again, and she knew that she could not dwell on everything that had happened and everything that she had lost. There would be plenty of time for that when she found herself alone again, but now, for the moment, she would have to stay present. She would have to be in the here and now, not some point in the past, and not wallowing in fears of the future.

Catherine needed to concentrate all her energy on this most pivotal meeting. Above all things, she would not appear weak to this woman, for if she was anything like the Earl of Barford, her aunt would sense that weakness and seize upon it like a bird of prey.

The carriage turned off the main road through the tiny village of Little Hayfield and began to grind its way along a winding gravel driveway.

The driveway was narrow and tree-lined, making it a little dark and strangely claustrophobic, even though Catherine could see the sky if she opened the window of the carriage and looked up.

Unable to see anything ahead for the twisting of the driveway and the many shrubs and trees, Catherine had leaned out of the window a little in the hopes of at least discerning something.

When the end of the driveway came, the house appeared quite suddenly. It was a small manor house, not much bigger than one of the lodges on the edge of her father's estate. But it was lovely nonetheless, built in a light grey stone.

The stones were large and textured, not the smooth stone of the buildings of Hertfordshire, but the sort of stone that must have been quarried in that area. Her first thought was that it was much more pleasing to look at, especially with the darkest green ivy she had ever seen growing up from one side and across at least a quarter of the front of the building.

The manor house was on two storeys, with square windows, their wooden frames painted white. And the wide wooden door was painted black, a gleaming black that looked almost wet it shone so.

When the carriage finally drew to a halt, Catherine could hardly imagine what she should do next. She should be moving, but of course, she could not. Instead, she was rooted to the spot as if her gown had been sewn to the carriage seat.

This was the moment she had been dreading, the moment she had been trying to put out of her mind every single day of her long journey to Derbyshire. She was about to meet her father's sister when all she wanted to do was jump down from the carriage and run away.

In her mind's eye, she could see herself running down that twisting driveway; she could almost hear the crunch of the gravel under her boots. She would run and run until she had no more breath and what she did from that moment onwards hardly mattered at all. Catherine

just wanted to be away.

The carriage wobbled as the driver jumped down and continued to do so as he un-strapped her luggage from the back plate.

Catherine remained in her seat, her mouth as dry as sand and her palms clammier than ever. And then she saw it; a movement out of the corner of her eye. It was the door, that gleaming, glossy black door slowly opening inwards. This was it; this was the moment.

Catherine's heart was pounding, and she wanted to look away, and yet she could not. All she could do was stare uselessly at that door and wait, not breathing until she saw her aunt at last.

The woman in the doorway looked out curiously, her keen eyes taking in the carriage and the driver's hurried occupations.

She was wearing a dark blue gown that was simply cut with long sleeves, the toes of neat black boots peeping out from beneath its hem. Her hair was light, probably a little grey, but it was hard to tell given that she was fair-haired.

There was something about the shape of the woman's face that was familiar to Catherine, and she knew, without a doubt, that the woman in the doorway was her father's sister.

The woman suddenly came to life, hastening down the narrow stone steps and walking smartly towards the carriage. Despite all her determination not to show any signs of weakness, Catherine could not stop her hands shaking.

She stared out of the carriage window as the woman approached, and the two of them locked eyes for a moment. The eyes were familiar too, for they were the same shape and colour as her father's.

The woman reached for the handle and opened the carriage door, and Catherine thought for all the world that she was going to faint at that moment.

That was until the woman smiled. It was such a warm and welcoming smile that she no longer resembled the Earl of Barford in any way.

“You must be my niece,” she said in the gentlest voice Catherine had heard since her own mother had died. “My dear Catherine, how tired you must be. Let us get you inside so that you may rest a while.” And with that, she reached into the carriage to take Catherine’s hand.

Chapter 10

Catherine's little chamber at Ivy Manor always benefited from the sunshine first thing in the morning; when the sun was out at any rate. And that morning, it was shining brightly, proudly announcing that summer was well and truly upon them.

Catherine had finally grown used to waking in that chamber, so small that it would have fitted into her old room at Barford Hall several times over. But, small as it was, she already felt at home there. She did not wake with the sense of muted dread that had been her constant companion for twenty years. Instead, there was a little sense of relief as she began to awaken every day, the sound of starlings and sparrows tweeting in the trees outside her window gently rousing her.

But the sadness was still there, and she had come to realize in the last two months that it was something that would never go away. She had not just lost the only man she had ever loved, but she had been forced away from her beloved brother, and the pain of them both was something that she knew would be eternal.

Still, Catherine knew how to be grateful for what she did have, even when what she had lost was without measure. She knew how to be grateful for peace at home, even the luxury of going down to breakfast at a sensible hour and not worrying about who would be at the table.

Every day at Ivy Manor, to find either her aunt or uncle or both at the table was nothing short of a joy. They had both been so kind to her from the moment she had arrived, and it was a kindness that she had not expected for a moment.

All her fears of a cruel aunt who thought and acted no better than the Earl of Barford had been dissolved into nothing within moments of her arrival.

When her aunt had smiled at her so kindly and reached in to take her hands and help her down from the carriage, Catherine had almost wept with relief. She had been entirely unable to think of anything to say and had simply stared back at her dumbfounded aunt without making a sound, her mouth silently opening and closing as if there was something she ought to say but had forgotten how to say it.

Celia Topwell had hurried her into the manor house, straight through into the drawing room. It seemed she had not been there a minute when a great tray of tea arrived, although Catherine was so dazed she could not have said who had set it down on the table.

“You are quite shattered my dear, are you not?” Celia had sat down at her side on the little couch and had gently untied the ribbons of her bonnet and removed it for her. “I shall leave your cloak for a moment, for I think fatigue has left you a little cold. Still, a nice hot cup of tea will restore you, and food. You need food, my dear.”

“You are so kind,” Catherine said incredulously and turned to look at her.

Even though Celia Topwell’s eyes were exactly those of her brother, now that Catherine knew a little better, she could see the kindness in them. And even the shape of her face, which had so disturbingly reminded Catherine of her father, seemed to develop subtle differences before her very eyes, marking the woman out as somebody very different indeed.

“You sound surprised, Catherine.” Cecile laughed, and it was such a wonderful sound, so warm it was almost like an embrace. “But I cannot blame you for that. You no doubt wondered if I was the same sort of person as your father.”

“Forgive me, I ...” Catherine said and still found herself a little too

dazed to partake of ordinary speech.

“There is nothing to forgive, my dear. You and I have never met, and you have only your father’s behaviour to go on as a yardstick by which to measure the rest of your paternal family. But I must tell you immediately that I have nothing at all in common with my brother, except perhaps the blood that runs through our veins. But then we none of us can help that, can we?” She smiled and laughed again.

“No, I suppose not.”

“I cannot begin to imagine what you have suffered prior to coming here, Catherine, but I daresay in time you will come to trust me and find yourself able to tell me about it. But I can speak to you plainly as one who has also been treated cruelly by the Earl of Barford, and so I think you will find in the end that the two of us might have more in common than you would think.”

“I had never heard of you before, not once. Until my father disowned me, I did not even know he had a sister. And I still do not even know your name,” Catherine said, feeling just a little more comfortable now that she was starting to trust that her aunt spoke true.

“Well, I am Celia Topwell. Obviously, I was once Celia Ambrose, but my marriage to Charles Topwell changed all of that.” She smiled broadly. “You may call me Celia, my dear, or Aunt Celia if you prefer it. But I understand if that is a little too informal for you, given that we have only just met. I think you have been through enough that you may choose it for yourself.”

“Aunt Celia,” Catherine said slowly, testing the words out for herself.

“I am not surprised that my brother has never mentioned me in all these years. He is a great one for disowning family members, or at least the females at any rate. I think it gives him a little power, and

since he does not rate females particularly highly, it is a power at very little expense to himself."

"He disowned you too, Aunt Celia?" Catherine said in a tiny voice, peering at her aunt in an awestruck, childlike fashion.

"He most certainly did, Catherine. And I was a little younger than you are, my dear."

"But I am only just twenty." Catherine's eyes were wide.

She was suddenly full of wonder at how it was her father could have disowned his own sister as such a young woman. They really did have a good deal in common already.

"And I was only just eighteen."

"Eighteen? Where did you go? How did you manage?"

"I had to get married. It was the only option open to me, but it was the right one I am glad to report." She smiled, and her eyes crinkled a little. Celia looked as if she were reminiscing, and the reminiscence was truly pleasing to her. "You see, I had fallen in love with a dashing young man from the North, Charles Topwell. He was a little older than me and from a nice family. But my brother had decided that I was to be used as a commodity by him, nothing more. I was to be given away to a friend of his, almost as a gift. But I had no interest in his friend, and I was determined I would not marry him. The more interest that Charles Topwell paid me, the angrier Oscar became."

"And it is Charles you married? Charles Topwell?" Catherine asked as her aunt pressed a hot teacup into her hand.

"Yes, and I was very lucky that he agreed to marry me after so brief an acquaintance. You see, we had known each other only a few weeks

when my brother decided that I was to marry his friend. He told me that if I did not do as he said, then I would be disowned. I knew I could not marry the man of Oscar's choosing, and so I had to accept that I was no longer a part of the Barford estate, no longer recognized as the new young Earl's sister."

"My father had only just become the Earl then?"

"Yes, and he was thoroughly enjoying his new status. But my own father was rather arrogant and unforgiving, and so I suppose that is where my brother learned his art. Oh, but he learned it well, for he could have turned the whole thing around and taught our father afresh."

"But what happened next?" Catherine was suddenly diverted from her problems and intent on the historical ones of her aunt.

"I was disowned before I had even a chance to explain it all to Charles. I went to see a mutual friend of ours and was amazed to find Charles there. As I told our friend of my misfortune, Charles bore witness, and by the end of the conversation, he had proposed to me."

"Oh, how wonderful," Catherine said and wished that her own ending in all of this had been so happy.

"At first, it did not seem so, even though I had fallen in love with him. You see I was wise enough to know that I had not known him long enough to truly know his character, and so I was well aware that I might have jumped from the frying pan into the fire."

"But you had not?"

"No, I had not. Charles was, and is, the finest man I have ever known."

“And he is not angry about me being here? After all, it must be the most dreadful imposition to suddenly have an unknown niece, a practical stranger, thrust upon your household. I cannot tell you how uncomfortable it makes me and how very sorry I am about it all. But I think you perceive already that I had no control over any of it, even though I am awfully glad to meet you at last.”

“And I am awfully glad to meet you, Catherine.” Celia took the half-drunk tea from Catherine and quickly topped it up again. She then placed a small triangular sandwich onto a plate and handed it to her. “You must eat something,” she said before continuing, “there is no imposition at all in having you here; none. You must let go of that notion immediately, for I think you will have had enough to put up with these last weeks. And as for Charles, he is thrilled that we shall have a young person in the house. We never were blessed with children of our own, you see, and so I think it will liven him up no end to have some young company.”

“I cannot tell you how much better I feel, Aunt Celia. Truly, these last days have been the most anxious of my life, not to mention the saddest.”

“Am I to understand that you have been forced to leave somebody you love behind?” Celia said gently.

“Two people,” Catherine said, and her eyes welled with tears.

Her throat felt tight, and she laid the plate with the uneaten sandwich back down on the table, knowing that she could not swallow if her life depended on it.

“Tell me,” Celia said and placed a hand on either side of Catherine’s face.

“My brother, Philip,” Catherine said as her voice broke. “And Thomas.

I loved Thomas."

"And is Thomas the reason your father disowned you in the first place?"

"Yes," Catherine said and nodded miserably. "He is the son of Duke Shawcross, you see."

"For heaven's sake!" Celia said in a slow, amazed way. "You surely do not mean that my brother continues the ridiculous argument that our father had with the old Duke?"

"If anything, it grows more fevered by the year. The current Duke and my father are very similar men, I believe, and my brother and I were raised never to speak to the Duke's sons."

"And that is all it took for your father to disown a girl who ought to have been most beloved to him." Celia shook her head in an aspect that was both sad and angry all at once. "That man does not deserve any family around him at all. And what of your brother? What sort of a man is he?"

"Philip is so kind and caring, Aunt Celia. And he is a very fine man. I am certain that he will make a far better Earl than my father has. But I wish I had never had to leave him behind, for we were the best of friends, you see."

"You have suffered a good deal, and I will not ask you any more about it today," Celia said and blinked hard at her own little tears.

As much as she had not wanted to upset her aunt, to see her tears on Catherine's behalf when they were so newly acquainted was one of the most touching things she had ever witnessed.

Even two months later as she lay in her bed in the small chamber

waiting for the day to begin, Catherine felt the familiar stirring of emotion as she thought of it.

And her aunt's kindness had continued in that same vein ever since. Never once from that moment had Catherine felt at all uncomfortable at Ivy Manor. And meeting Charles Topwell, the man she had come to call Uncle Charles almost immediately, had only served to make her all the more comfortable.

He truly was pleased to see her there and, remembering the Earl of Barford well, was not at all surprised to hear of her father's overblown reaction to such a simple friendship.

Between the two of them, Celia and Charles Topwell had done their utmost to make her not only at home at Ivy Manor but to try to ease the sadness she had arrived with. And even though it was sadness that Catherine knew would never relent, it meant all the world to her that her aunt and uncle would even try.

As Catherine lay in her bed and smiled rather vaguely at the ceiling, she was suddenly gripped by a sweeping, undeniable queasiness. It was the third time that week, only this time it did not seem that it would pass if she curled into a ball and went back to sleep.

This time, the queasiness would not be denied, and she was instantly propelled from her bed as if her body had been overtaken by another.

She raced across the room to her little washstand and was violently sick.

As Catherine splashed cold water on her face, she found she did not feel very much better. She staggered slowly back to her bed and slithered in under the covers once more.

Even as the sun came out suddenly so brightly, lighting the little room

beautifully, Catherine's spirits sank. What had been nothing more than a vague worry but days before was slowly becoming a certainty.

And it was a certainty that she felt sure, even in a kindly home such as Ivy Manor, would not be well received. Perhaps she would now know what it was like to be disowned entirely.

Chapter 11

Thomas sat down on the trunk of the fallen tree and stared out across the flat water of Stromlyn Lake. Summer was finally here, with the scent of warm, fragrant tree bark on the air and the constant accompaniment of such varied birdsong here there and everywhere.

And yet Thomas felt as flat and sad as he had done every day of the last three months.

Ever since Catherine had been taken from him, Thomas had gone down to Stromlyn Lake daily. Even when Catherine was still at home, they had mostly just met once a week, occasionally twice when they could not bear the parting.

Now, after three long months and finding that his heart was not healing at all, Thomas would have given anything for just five minutes. If only he could have five minutes with her every week for the rest of his life, Thomas could swear that he would be content.

But instead of a paltry five minutes, Thomas faced a lifetime of not knowing where she was and never seeing her again. And it most certainly was not for want of trying.

More than once, he had thought to try to get a message to Philip Ambrose to see if he could at least get an address in Derbyshire for the mysterious aunt. After all, Philip had certainly seemed decent enough when he had engineered their final meeting.

But as time passed, Thomas had to wonder if that final meeting was simply a parting gift to his sister. Perhaps, deep in his heart, Philip Ambrose blamed Thomas for the whole thing. After all, if Thomas had never approached Catherine, brother and sister would not have been wrenched apart.

And yet he could not think that of him, for his momentary dealings with him in arranging the thing had been cordial enough, not to mention the fact that Catherine had proclaimed her brother to be the finest of men.

Still, he could not guarantee that any message he sent to Philip would be safe. The Earl of Barford was a far crueler man than Thomas could ever have imagined. And, as much as he did not care for his own father, Thomas was certainly glad that his father was *not* Oscar Ambrose.

Thomas was sure that his own father could not have dreamed up a punishment so vile and so complete; one which destroyed the lives of three people if he included Philip. Still, perhaps that was because his father seemed to lack that sort of imagination. As far as cruelty was concerned, perhaps the Duke of Shawcross and the Earl of Barford were evenly matched, even if the Earl was a little more creative.

“You are here again, Thomas?” He looked up to see Pierce walking his horse down the steepest slope that led to the water’s edge.

Pierce spoke in a tone which was newly adopted, one he had only been using these last few months. It was a friendly, pleasant tone, with an edge of concern about it. Given that Pierce was the absolute cause of Thomas’ current malady, the tone always seemed inappropriate and almost always left Thomas clenching his fists at his sides.

“I am here again as you see me,” Thomas said in a flat tone and stared in a disinterested way at his brother. “But I do not see what it is to you.”

“Can I not ask a simple question? Make a simple inquiry?”

“I do not see what good it does you,” Thomas said sharply. “I am here every day as you well know. To comment upon it when you already have that knowledge is simply ridiculous.”

“Can you not see that I am searching for something to say?” he said and looked at him beseechingly.

Thomas had known that Pierce had almost instantly regretted his interference, his telling of tales. As soon as he realized the devastating effect it had had, not only on Thomas but on a young lady with whom he ought never to have any argument, his remorse was clear.

And Thomas had equally realized that Pierce had never imagined that things would go so far. But he had only not imagined it because he had not bothered to think about it, being so lost in his own gains.

But, in the end, there had been *no* gain for him, and certainly not the gain that he had hoped for. Instead of finding that he had finally received some approval from their father, the news had simply angered the old man too much for him to bother with such trifles as *praise*.

And, the fact that Pierce had seen fit to contact the Earl of Barford about the matter had made it all the worse for him. The Duke had been furious that Pierce had given his old adversary any warning at all, wanting the punishment of his second son to be entirely in his own hands.

And whilst the Duke had been pleased to see the devastating effect the separation had on Thomas, it was still clear to see that he was somewhat peeved not to be the one to inflict the pain in the first place.

“Why must you search for something to say? In fact, why must you say anything at all?” Despite knowing that Pierce had not foreseen the

dreadful outcome, still, Thomas could not forgive him.

Had they been much closer as brothers, perhaps he might have found the smallest slice of mercy in his heart, but since they were not, Thomas was content to nurse his anger.

“You went to see a friend last week in Northampton, did you not? Hugh Weatherby, your old school friend?” Pierce spoke in a conversational manner, but Thomas could already sense that his brother knew it to be a lie.

Thomas had not been to see Hugh Weatherby; in fact, he had not set eyes on his old friend from Eton for some years. He had known at the time that it would be an easy lie to discover, and yet he had not cared.

Even now as he looked at his brother, certain that he knew the truth, Thomas could not have cared less. What did it matter to him now? What could his father do to him that had not already been done?

“What of it?” Thomas said solemnly.

“You did not really go to Northampton, did you?” Despite the accusation, Pierce still sounded friendly and concerned.

In days gone by, Pierce would have sounded arrogant and self-satisfied. It seemed like a long time since Thomas had heard that old tone from his brother. And yet still he knew he would never forgive him.

“No, I did not,” Thomas said simply and looked away from his brother to stare out across the glassy flat surface of the lake.

He looked at the opposite shore, staring at the trees caught upside down in reflection, seeming for all the world as if they pierced the water and carried on down for twenty feet, even though he knew the

water to be much shallower than that.

The green of the leaves and the blue of the sky were reflected faithfully, almost nothing to choose between the reflection and the real thing. He tried to imagine himself and Catherine there, hand-in-hand and strangely upside down as they walked alongside the reflected trees.

“You went to Derbyshire, did you not?” Pierce’s tone had become almost gentle.

“Yes, yes, yes. I went to Derbyshire, Pierce. I went to the Peak District, as a matter of fact, and searched for Catherine Ambrose.” Despite his confrontational tone, Thomas did not bother to take his eyes off the lake to even look at his brother as he spoke. “Now run along and tell Father, there’s a good fellow. He might even notice you this time.”

“Thomas, I am not asking you because I seek information with which to regale our father, far from it.”

“It matters not to me, Pierce. You may tell him or not tell him as is your want. Do you not see, there is nothing left to be done to me that you have not done already? You have won, Pierce. You are the victor as always, so why are you not satisfied? Why are you not rolling around in your victory? It is complete after all.”

“Because it is not a victory to me.”

“Dear me, then it would seem that you wasted your time,” Thomas said sarcastically.

“Did you find her?” Pierce said with a sigh, clearly intent on carrying on regardless of his brother’s mood.

“No,” Thomas said and felt as deflated at that moment as he had at

the time.

With no information whatsoever, Thomas had travelled to the Peak District of Derbyshire. He had never been that far north before and had no idea what to expect. He had somehow thought that it would be much smaller than Hertfordshire and that a few simple inquiries would soon lead him to the homestead of the sister of the Earl of Barford.

He had travelled post-chaise all the way from Hertfordshire, all the while trying not to think of the inevitable foolishness of his journey. Thomas knew he had to try. He had to do something.

But when he had first seen the very beginnings of the Peak District itself, he quickly realized that he was never going to find her.

It was immense, so vast that he could hardly believe it. It was rugged and remote, and it spanned so many miles that he knew that it was all so pointless.

His first inquiry had been at a coaching inn on the outskirts of a small town called Glossop. He had asked a sceptical looking northerner if he knew of a young woman from the South moving in with her aunt of late. The man had asked him which town or village, and he could not say.

The man then asked the name of the aunt, and when he could not respond to that either, the man had screwed up his face, snorted, and walked away as if he thought that Thomas would be better placed to head back down South and present himself at the bedlam.

Thomas had not even stayed a full day in the Peak District, knowing that the whole thing had been an exercise in futility. There was nobody to ask, no names to give that would be recognized, nor even an idea where in that vast, beautiful landscape she might be.

And so, in the end, he had travelled back to Hertfordshire post-chaise, utterly defeated and sadder than ever. It had made their separation so final, so permanent.

Thomas had made the journey back over some days without speaking to a soul. As he climbed into each new post carriage, he kept his eyes averted, not wanting anybody to strike up a conversation with him. He realized that made him a most disagreeable travelling companion, but he did not care.

From then onwards, Thomas had been even more withdrawn and sullen than he had before embarking upon his trip to Derbyshire. He let the hopelessness settle about him like a shroud and did not care what became of him from there onwards.

All he had for himself was bitter castigation. He had gone to Derbyshire with the idea of finding her, taking her hand, and running away. He wanted to escape with her, marry her, and live simply. And they would live simply too, for he had very little money to his name and no skill with which to earn any more. That did not matter to him if only he could find her.

But worse was the idea that he had failed to come up with the plan before. He was sure that if he had taken Catherine's hand that night at the Lodge on the edge of the Barford estate – if he had beseeched her then to run with him, to live in poverty even, she would have done it.

But why had he not thought of that at the time? Why had he let shock and disbelief overtake him and render his thoughts useless and impractical?

"Thomas, I am sorry that you did not find her," Pierce said, and for the first time, his voice was welcome.

If nothing else, it pulled Thomas out of the wheel of self-blame that he fell into every time he was left alone.

“Are you?” Thomas narrowed his eyes and glared at his brother.

“I know you will not believe me, but I am. I am sorry for all of it, every bit of it,” Pierce said and looked down at his feet. “And if I could take it all back, I would.”

“The thing is, my dear brother, you cannot take it back. It is done now, and it cannot be repaired. There is nothing left in my life that I care about anymore, and that includes you. I cannot look at you without seeing my own loss; do you not see that? You were the cause of it, Pierce. And what had I done to deserve such treatment from you? When had I been so unutterably cruel? What had I done to you that you hate me so?”

“It was not that; it was never that. I have never hated you, Thomas,” Pierce said and let out a great sigh.

“But that cannot be true. You cannot have hatched such a plan and carried it to fruition without hating me.” Even as he spoke, Thomas knew that even *he* did not believe that.

What Pierce had done from beginning to end had been very little to do with Thomas or his feelings for him. It was entirely centred around their father and an immature young man’s desperate attempts to have his approval. Thomas’ pain was nothing more than a coincidence, a byproduct of such searching.

“Thomas, I do not know how to begin to explain my actions. And even if I did, you are too good and steady a man to understand my motives. It would make no sense to you, for you have always been very sure of yourself and your place in the world.”

“Is that so?” Thomas was sullen again.

“Yes, it is so,” Pierce struggled on. “All I can do is apologize to you for what I did and for everything that followed it. Had I known how bad it would be, I would not have done it.”

“Your explanations and apologies are all very well, Pierce, but they do not change anything. Not only do they not change my world nor do anything to make it better, but they do not change how I feel about you. I am not ready to forgive you, and I doubt that I shall ever be. You have effectively destroyed my life; you have killed me in your own way.”

“Thomas, please.”

“No, it is true. Perhaps the only thing that you can do for me is to die yourself, for at least then I would not have to look at you. Do you not understand that you are dead to me already?”

Pierce, with nothing left to say, slowly turned his horse and led him back up the slope. And as he watched him go, knowing that Pierce had only moved to disguise the fact that his eyes were filling with tears, Thomas regretted his words.

He knew why Pierce had done it, and even if he could not forgive him, he did not truly want to hurt him so badly. After all, at the root of it all was their father. If there was anybody who should accept the blame for it all, it was the Duke of Shawcross.

But that was never going to happen, and Thomas’ heart was so broken that he needed somebody to blame.

Pierce would just have to do.

Chapter 12

As Catherine packed the last gown into her trunk and closed it down finally, she wondered what Lytham would be like. She had never been to Lancashire before and only knew it to be either further north than Derbyshire was.

Celia had told her that it was on the coast and that they would be able to see the Irish Sea crashing onto the shoreline from the window of their lodgings. At least she thought they would, for she had left the arrangement of their lodgings to Agnes Price.

Catherine liked Agnes Price and imagined that if she said their lodgings were close to the sea, then they would be. She was an extraordinarily efficient woman of around Celia's age, and she held a position at Ivy Manor that was hard to describe succinctly.

For the most part, it struck Catherine that Agnes was somewhere between being a paid companion and a housekeeper. She was a woman who had been widowed young, and never having any intention or inclination to marry again, had found her unique position in the home of Celia and Charles Topwell.

Agnes regularly took tea with them in the drawing room, and she and Celia often went out together to play bridge or to go into Glossop to order fabric and other such similar sundries. They were certainly friends, that much Catherine had discerned with ease.

Ivy Manor was not a place that was blessed with many household staff; there were just enough to keep things going.

There was a man who acted as driver and butler rolled into one, although more often than not Celia answered the front door herself. There were two maids of all work and a gardener, although the

gardener was of the jobbing variety and lived at the other end of Little Hayfield. He had other gardens to tend and generally spent only a day or two a week on the beautiful grounds of Ivy Manor.

Catherine had to admit that she did not feel any deprivation at the smallness of Ivy Manor nor the general lack of staff. She liked it all the better, content to do things for herself and finding it homelier than Barford Hall had been.

But now she was to leave it for the next four months, and she realized what a wrench that would be. Catherine had settled in so well at Ivy Manor that she had come to think of it as home already, even though Philip was not there, and Thomas still left such a hole in her heart and her life.

But things could be very much worse, that much she knew now. Catherine could be homeless altogether, given her condition.

When she had realized that she was with child, Catherine hardly knew what to do next. She had been at Ivy Manor only three months, and despite the fact that Celia felt so familiar and warm to her, still, Catherine had not been able to find the words to tell her.

In the end, it was Celia who had approached Catherine and not the other way around.

Catherine sat down on the bed and sighed as she thought of Celia's kindness on the day they had first spoken of it. They had been taking tea together in the drawing room, and her Uncle Charles was mercifully out of the house, down in Glossop on some business or other.

"Sooner or later, Catherine, we are going to have to talk about it," Celia had said quite out of the blue as they drank hot tea in comfortable silence.

“I beg your pardon, Celia?” Catherine had responded, her tone innocent as her stomach lurched.

“Forgive me for confronting you, my dear, for I would not upset you for the world,” Celia began and seemed concerned and uncomfortable. “But you are with child, are you not?”

“I … I …” Catherine had almost dropped her cup, and her cheeks flushed so violently that they were almost painfully warm.

“I am so sorry to bring it up, for I do not want to make you upset.” Celia had risen from her seat in the armchair to sit at Catherine’s side on the small couch.

“I do not know what to say,” Catherine said as tears of fear and shame rolled down her face. “Except to tell you that I had not meant it to happen. It was not a habit with us, you see.” She was desperate to explain herself, to have her aunt know that she was not a bad person. “It was that last night in Hertfordshire; Philip had arranged for Thomas and me to say goodbye to each other without my father’s knowledge. We were both so upset, so desperate at the realization that we would never see one another again and it just … It just …”

“I understand, my dear. You do not need to explain yourself, and you must not suffer the idea that I despise you for it, for I do not. I know you are a fine young woman, and I know what you suffered at your father’s hands. That your emotions ran away with you on the night you were to be parted from Thomas is understandable.”

“Thank you, Aunt Celia. Thank you for being so kind when I had not even the courage to tell you myself.”

“I cannot imagine that it would have been an easy thing to say.” Celia took Catherine’s hand. “In truth, it was not an easy subject for me to

broach either. But we can only move forward, my dear, and I think that we have some plans to make now, do we not?"

"I do not know where I am to live now," Catherine said, and her voice grew thick as she tried to control her fear and emotion. "You see, I cannot go home, and I do not know anybody else."

"What on earth do you mean, Catherine? You live here, do you not? Here at Ivy Manor."

"Yes, but when you tell Uncle Charles, he will disown me too, will he not? I am certain that he would not want me here under his roof, and I would not blame him for it. It is enough that I was sent here to be a burden in the first place, without bringing such trouble with me."

"Trust me, my dear niece, Charles Topwell will not throw you out. He will not turn you out of Ivy Manor now or ever, so you must not upset yourself so badly."

"It is kind of you to try to keep my spirits up, Aunt Celia, but you cannot know how Uncle Charles will react. I cannot think that he will be anything other than angry about it."

"He is not angry, Catherine." Celia smiled at her kindly.

When she smiled, Celia Topwell bore no resemblance whatsoever to Catherine's father. Her dark eyes were warm and kind and her skin still bright and clear, despite the fine lines. There was something in her treatment of Catherine that was so motherly and tender that she found her tears flowing again.

"He knows?" she said in a dry, cracking voice.

"He knows," Celia said gently. "Or at least he knows that I believe it to be true. That is why he is out of the house today, to give us a little

time to talk privately so that you might talk freely and without embarrassment."

"And he does not want to throw me out? He does not want to turn me away?" Catherine said incredulously.

"No, of course, he does not. We have discussed it and think we have come up with something that will be very easy to do. Something to help you, you understand."

"But what can be done?" Catherine said and looked down at her slightly thickened waist. "It is soon going to be very obvious to all what condition I am in, is it not? And how will Uncle Charles bear the humiliation of it all? It is not fair of me to expect him to do so."

"We have plans to make, Catherine, and I hope you will feel a little better when the details are all arranged."

"Really?"

"Charles has assorted relations all over Lancashire, and it is not unusual for us to visit them from time to time."

"So, we are to stay with Uncle Charles' relations?"

"No, but that is what we shall lead everybody here to suspect. Not that there are too many people who are overly interested in how we choose to spend our time here at Ivy Manor." She laughed. "We are not a family of such note that we are much out in society, and for the most part, we are pleasantly beneath the notice of others."

"But where shall we stay then?"

"We are going to go to Lytham in Lancashire; it is on the coast. We shall take some lodgings there for the next few months until the baby

is born."

"And then what?"

"We shall find a suitable home for the baby, and then when you are rested enough we shall return here to Ivy Manor."

"A suitable home?" Catherine knew that she was not in a position to argue.

A suitable home very likely meant a Lancashire orphanage, even if her aunt was intent upon finding a good one. But the idea of it made her heart ache; how could any child that belonged to Catherine and Thomas end up in an orphanage? Descended from Earls and Dukes, her child would be abandoned into a life of uncertainty.

And yet she knew that she could not bring the child home, there was no question of that. In truth, Catherine knew that she was lucky not to be turned out altogether. Although she had come to know Celia and Charles very well and was sure that they had warmed to her and thought a good deal of her, she could not have expected such kindly treatment. But they had been kind, extraordinarily kind.

She knew she could not repay them by demanding that she keep her child. Wherever she went in the world now, surely that was not possible anyway? A young woman with no husband and a child would be a pariah, even if she *were* the daughter of an Earl. Perhaps even more particularly because she was the daughter of an Earl, for society had greater expectations of moral fortitude in somebody of her station.

She had no means by which to show her gratitude to her aunt and uncle for their understanding, except than to go along with their plan to the very letter and to do so without complaint. After all, Catherine knew that she had relinquished her right to any complaint in this

world, even if she had only ever acted out of love.

To society, that was not a good enough reason; it was never a good enough reason, no matter how sad the story.

“Yes, we shall find somewhere suitable. But I think it would be best if we do that in Lancashire, not Derbyshire, for your own sake, my dear.”

“Yes, yes of course,” Catherine said, determined to go along with every part of it. “I do not know how to thank you and Uncle Charles; really I do not. But can Uncle Charles really spend so much time away from Ivy Manor when he has his own matters of business to attend to here?”

“Charles will not be coming with us, Catherine. It will just be dear Agnes and us.”

“Mrs Price knows of my disgrace?” Catherine said a little helplessly.

“Your condition, Catherine, not your disgrace,” Celia said firmly. “And no, she does not yet know it. But let me assure you that she is the most discreet of women. I have trusted her with confidences of my own and been glad to do so these last twenty years. And she will be invaluable when your time comes, Catherine, for she has helped to birth children before and knows exactly what to do. Not to mention the fact that she is extremely efficient in all things and will have the lay of the land in Lytham long before we do. She is much more forthright than I am, and I imagine that it would be Agnes who takes the child to its new home.”

“Whatever you think is for the best, Aunt Celia. I am in your hands, and glad to be so, for I could not have imagined anybody treating me with the understanding that you have.”

“Well, if you agree to it all, I shall start to make plans. I daresay it will be two or three weeks before we can set off for Lytham, for we shall need to get our own little story in place. Agnes will undoubtedly find us some very suitable lodgings, and everything will be well, in the end, you will see.”

And Celia had been right; everything had fallen into place. Her Uncle Charles had been wonderful, treating her with kindness and concern and not one moment’s scorn or ridicule. Agnes had shown no sign of being shocked or horrified; rather she had busied herself with the practicalities of their journey and their stay, never once treating Catherine any differently than she had before.

Catherine leaned forward and checked the fastening of her packed trunk, looking around the small chamber for the last time. She would miss the little place, and yet she did not want to hasten her return. After all, the next time she slept in this bed, everything would have changed. She would be a mother, albeit a mother with no child, and she would be altogether different.

With a sigh, Catherine rose and walked out of the tiny room without looking back, determined to find her Uncle Charles, throw her arms around his neck, and thank him once again before bidding him farewell for the next four months.

Chapter 13

Thomas continued to ignore his brother's existence for the next few months, despite the fact that he had seen some great changes in him. Pierce no longer seemed to seek his father's approval in everything he did, and it had struck Thomas that he had lost interest in a good deal of life's activities.

Penrose Carlton, for his part, seemed not to have noticed the change in either of his sons. He paid Thomas no more heed than he had ever done, often reminding him of the time he had described himself and Catherine as the *afterthoughts*.

But what had been surprising to Thomas was the fact that their father had not noticed the great change in Pierce either. He had not seen the cessation of the arrogance and self-satisfaction that Pierce had worn like a suit of armour for so long.

But even though Thomas had recognized changes in his brother, even understood that what he was witnessing was largely remorse, still, he could not forgive him. His own pain was so great and showed no sign of abating. It had been eight months or more, but his heart felt as raw as it had done on the morning he had kissed his beloved Catherine goodbye forever and darted away from the Barford estate before the sun came up.

How they had cried as they embraced, becoming soaked in each other's tears. Thomas had known almost from the first that he had loved Catherine Ambrose, but he had never realized until the moment of their parting just how much.

Those last, terrible moments were all that Thomas could see when Pierce tried to speak with him. It did not matter that Pierce had motives other than to hurt his brother because, in the end, that was all

Pierce had achieved. Had he kept quiet, it was likely that neither the Duke nor the Earl would have been any the wiser.

And so it was that Thomas, heading out once more to Stromlyn Lake, found himself pursued by the brother who would simply not give up.

“Thomas, I wish you would not go to Stromlyn Lake every day. You will never mend if you do not change things.” Pierce was talking sense, whether or not he had a right to speak it.

“I shall do as I choose. It is none of your affair.”

“I do not ask for nor expect your forgiveness, Thomas, but can we at least try to be friends? If only a little?”

“You were never keen to be my friend before.” Thomas walked into the stable to see if his horse was any closer to being saddled.

Pierce followed him in, and it was clear that one of the stable hands was saddling his horse also. Thomas let go an angry snort, thinking it likely that Pierce was going to follow him again. It was something he attempted from time to time in a bid to have Thomas speak to him.

Well, Thomas would show him. The moment his own horse was suitably saddled, Thomas would tear off out of the estate and leave his brother far behind.

Why would he not let it be?

“We have been friends in the past, Thomas. When we were boys we …”

“We are not boys now.” Thomas cut him off.

“I know,” Pierce said and fell silent as he looked helplessly around

him.

Thomas knew that cutting Pierce off like that would interrupt his flow of speech. It would be some moments before he would be able to come up with something more suitable to say, for he did not have Thomas' own quick wit and intelligence.

Over the years, Thomas had used that to his advantage when the brothers were arguing, and yet now he felt a stab of guilt over it as he stood in the stables staring at him. Pierce had spent the better part of eight months trying to atone for what he had done, and Thomas had fended off every attempt.

But still, Thomas could not let go of his resentment, and seeing that his horse was ready, he scrambled up onto his back and charged out of the stable, leaving Pierce to stare after him open-mouthed.

Thomas did not slow his horse at all, cantering through the estate and out into the countryside beyond. He tore down the track which headed in the direction of the lake, the breeze lifting his thick red-brown hair as he went.

It was the fastest he had ridden for some time, and there was something so freeing in it that he did not want to ever slow down again. But his horse was blowing hard, and Thomas had already begun to regret forcing the poor creature to run hard without warning and maintain it.

And so, Thomas slowed his horse to a comfortable trot, and now that it was safe to do so, he turned his head to look back the way he had come.

When he saw Pierce taking a shortcut through the fields instead of following him along the track, Thomas let out a noisy sigh.

“For God’s sake, go home,” he said, heard by none but his horse. “Just leave me to my anger.”

Thomas considered setting off again at speed but suddenly realized there was no point. Pierce was not going to give up.

Thomas turned back to concentrate on his trotting horse when a feeling of dread seemed to take him over. Something was wrong. Pierce was cutting through walled fields, and he was going far too fast. If he did not slow, he would come upon the high dry-stone wall at the top of the first field, and there was no telling what his horse would do. But no, surely Pierce knew what he was heading towards.

Thomas, feeling a dreadful cold prickling at the back of his neck, stopped his horse altogether and turned him around to face back towards his approaching brother.

Pierce was still flying along, and Thomas, forgetting all that stood between them at that moment, began to shout and wave his arms. He wanted so desperately to warn his brother that he was almost frozen in fear.

Pierce showed no sign of slowing down, and Thomas could only watch helplessly from the track that ran alongside the field. With the wall too high and no run-up for his horse from the track that would give them any hope of clearing it, there was little else Thomas could do but yell and wave his arms.

When tragedy struck, the world seemed to slow down horribly. Thomas watched with horror as Pierce’s horse balked some distance before the wall, as Thomas had suspected it would.

Pierce was thrown so easily from the saddle that the whole thing seemed quite graceful in the beginning; the horse had stopped dead, and Pierce kept going. He arced through the air, and Thomas prayed

that he would clear the wall.

But Pierce lost the grace and height very quickly, and the world seemed to speed up once again as he was smashed, head first, against the wall.

Thomas cried out, and seeing no way to get his horse into the field, jumped down from its back and clambered over the wall himself. He dropped down on the other side, landing heavily and twisting his ankle painfully. He half ran, half limped his way across the field, crying out to his brother as he went.

“Pierce! Pierce!” He called again and again, never once receiving an answer.

Before he was but halfway across the field, Thomas was drenched in sweat. His shirt clung to him, and he swiped sweat from his eyes with the cuff of the old brown tailcoat he always wore for riding.

When he reached Pierce, he could see that he was motionless. His breathing was laboured and sporadic, and Thomas felt like a child again, a young boy who did not know what to do.

Fear overtook him, and tears filled his eyes as he looked helplessly down at his brother. He dropped to his knees and touched his drip-white face but could get no response whatsoever.

Knowing that he could not just stay there staring and hoping Pierce would come around, Thomas rose and snatched the reins of his brother’s horse. Struggling harder than he had ever done in his life, Thomas pulled Pierce up finally and laid him face down over the horse’s saddle. There was no other way to manage it, and that was all there was to it.

If he left Pierce there, he would die without a doubt. More than

anything, Thomas wanted to get him back to Shawcross and make him comfortable whilst the physician was sent for.

At first, he walked on foot, leading his brother's horse slowly along. But he could not bear the slowness, feeling the valuable, vital minutes slipping away, so he clambered up awkwardly behind Pierce's drooping, horribly still body.

It was near to impossible to ride the horse from so far back, but Thomas leaned forward, straining every muscle in his body, and managed to get the poor frightened creature moving again.

Still, he could not go fast, for fear that Pierce would be dislodged and slide off the saddle, but it was certainly quicker than walking alongside had been.

"We will be home soon, Pierce. You just hold on, alright? Do you hear me? You just hold on." Thomas heard his voice crack as the emotions seized him once again. The weight of the last months seemed to almost crush him, but in a very different way.

It was not the pain of losing Catherine this time, but the loss of the last eight months with a brother who had tried time and time again to apologize. If only he had known where it would all end up, Thomas knew he would have done things differently. But that was the wonderfully vile thing about hindsight; it had perfect vision.

Suddenly, Thomas had an image of the two of them playing with bows and arrows that the old stable master had made for them. The arrows were purposefully blunt and harmless, but that had not lessened the boys' excitement at all as they chased each other all over the estate, inexpertly loosing off the round-ended arrows in all directions.

They had played until it was almost dark, and their governess was fractious with agitation. It was one of those childhood days that was

so wonderful and seemed to go on forever. A day that would always stand out, even when they were old men.

They had been friends.

Before their mother had died and their father's concentrated influence had changed Pierce into a proud young man who followed his father blindly into arrogance, they *had* been friends.

But Thomas realized that even after that time, they had never particularly been enemies. They had aggravated one another and mistrusted one another on occasion, it was true.

But that had not been the sum total of their relationship as young men. There had still been laughter, although it was true that it was very occasional, and they had continued to attend events together and converse without too much trouble, especially when out of their father's company. They just were not as close as they had been. Without their mother's countering influence, Pierce had been allowed to develop as his father would have him. But was that really Pierce's fault? After all, he was the heir and could hardly escape the determined attention of their father.

Perhaps being the *afterthought* had been a far luckier position.

By the time Thomas reached the front of Shawcross Hall, he felt utterly shattered. He called out for help, his voice coming in ragged gasps, and was quickly joined by several of his father's footmen and a host of young men from the stables.

His father marched down the great stone steps of the hall and surveyed the scene there coolly. Thomas studied his face for a moment and could see nothing there; not fear, not love, nothing.

"What is all this?" he said in his customary bluff manner.

“Pierce was thrown from his horse,” Thomas said and fought hard against tears again; they would do him no good in the face of his father. “He hit a wall hard. He is very badly hurt.” Thomas looked back to where the footmen were gently trying to lift Pierce from the agitated horse.

“Damn fool, what was he playing at? He needs to be more careful,” the Duke went on.

“Father, did you not hear me? Pierce is very badly hurt.” He turned away from his father and approached one of the stable hands. “Please, will you ride into the village and call upon Doctor Harper. Tell him what has happened and that we need him immediately.”

“Yes, My Lord,” the young man said and set off at speed for the stables.

The footmen had finally lifted Pierce from the horse and were gently carrying him into the hall. Without words, they moved as one and set off up the staircase in the direction of Pierce’s chamber.

Thomas followed quickly behind, not knowing if their father would join them.

Several quietly tearful maids did what they could to make Pierce comfortable in his bed as Thomas looked on helplessly. He could see that his brother’s breathing was becoming ever more rapid and shallow, and his skin was a pale grey against the almost purple of his lips.

The moment the maids had finished, Thomas drew up a chair at the side of the bed and reached out to lay a hand on Pierce’s cheek.

“I do not know if you can hear me, Pierce, but I shall speak anyway,”

Thomas began, looking over his shoulder to be sure they were alone at last. “I want you to know that I do not blame you for Catherine. I know my behaviour would suggest otherwise, but I have been in such pain these last months. But I have always known there was more to it; something else at the root of it all, and you were never really to blame. The way life has been led in this house since before we were born has infected everything in its path, us included.” Thomas’ voice broke, and his tears fell. He knew with certainty he could never have explained that there was not long left. “And now I am asking you to forgive me. Forgive me for shunning your efforts, even when I could see true remorse. Let this awfulness now be done between us. Let us be the little boys who ran about Shawcross with our bows and arrows all those years ago.”

Thomas felt the tiniest movement from the bed and looked intently at Pierce. There was the faintest, briefest flicker of a smile on his brother’s face, and he looked almost serene.

And then he was gone; one last gentle rush of air from his lungs, and Pierce Carlton took no more breath. Thomas let his head fall forward onto his brother’s chest and wept.

Chapter 14

They had been in Lytham for almost four months when Catherine's first twinges came. She knew it could not be long before the child that she and Thomas had created would come into this world, and she was excited and terrified all at once.

"How are you feeling? Your colour is a little high, Catherine." Agnes Price sat next to Catherine on the wide window seat.

"I can feel more movement, Agnes, and little pains. Well, hardly pains, but I do not know how else to describe them." Catherine smiled at Agnes before staring out of the window and across the calm blue sea. "I suppose I am more uncomfortable than anything else."

"Then I do not think it can be long now." Agnes gave her hand a reassuring squeeze and stared out at the sea also.

Agnes was such a kind, warm woman that it was not difficult to see why it was Celia had kept her as a companion.

"Agnes, tell me again, is it a nice place?" Catherine heard the tremor in her voice.

"It is clean and warm, one of the nicest I have seen. And they are very discreet, Catherine; you need have no fear of it."

Catherine did not doubt that Agnes was telling the truth, but it was not discretion or lack thereof that she feared. It was parting with her baby; Thomas' baby.

Even after so many months, Catherine still thought of Thomas every day. She thought of how he had held her hand down by Stromlyn Lake and how they had both known that it could not last forever. It

had seemed almost cruel that they had fallen in love so completely. Of all the people in the world, why were *they* meant to be together? Why, when they could not be?

If Catherine had the energy left to be angry, she would have been. Life ought to have been different for them; they had no argument between them, no feud. All they had, all they had ever had, was love.

They should have been able to court, to become engaged. They should have been married by now, eagerly expecting the birth of their first child with their families around them, all smiles and congratulations.

But no. Because two arrogant men had fought over a woman so many years ago, they were apart; their lives ruined, and the birth of their baby reduced to a matter of shame and secrecy.

Catherine suddenly burst into tears; she could not bear the wheel of thoughts which went around and around in her mind.

“I am so sorry, my dear,” Agnes said and pulled Catherine into her arms. “I know that none of this can be easy for you. I cannot imagine how you are feeling.”

In the absence of Celia, who had walked into the town in the hope of buying some apples, Agnes was a very fine substitute.

“I know I should think of myself as wrong, as having behaved badly, but I cannot. It should never have been this way, and only the stubbornness of old men has made it so. That is the difference between me being thought of as bad and thought of as good. *Two old men*. It is so very wrong, Agnes, but I am powerless to make it right. My heart is already broken. I lost Thomas, but it seems that is not enough. There is more to pay, and I am to let go of my precious baby. I am to have my heart broken again as if I deserve it to be so.” She wept hard, her breath coming in noisy gulps.

“I know. I know,” Agnes soothed and began to rock her back and forth. “And I am so sorry. You are not bad, my girl. You have done nothing wrong, and you most certainly have not deserved any of this.”

How wonderful it was to be surrounded by people who did not judge her. Society’s main pastime was just that, criticism and judgement, but Celia and Agnes did not partake.

Suddenly a great dragging sensation ripped through Catherine’s belly, and she cried out in pain. She lurched forward as if to escape it, and Agnes, as efficient as ever, expertly got her to her feet and sped her through to the little chamber.

As Catherine perched, afraid and breathing heavily on the edge of the bed, Agnes hurried back and forth with everything that she needed to prepare for the delivery.

No sooner did she have everything ready than Celia returned from town. Catherine knew her time had come, and she prayed to God to help her child be delivered safely into the world. All thoughts beyond that moment would have to wait until her work was done.

And hard work it was, although Catherine had known it would not be easy. It was the way of things and always had been.

But the moment Catherine set eyes on her baby boy, her exhaustion fell away. She was energized and suddenly full of purpose as she took him from Celia and held him in her arms for the first time.

She looked into his tiny, perfect face and saw Thomas’ beautiful blue eyes looking back at her. She squinted at the sparse little tuft of chestnut red hair and touched it lightly with her fingers.

“Beautiful. He is just beautiful,” she said through tears of joy. “His

hair and eyes are so like his father's. He is the image of him."

The baby breathed slowly and made contented little noises as he peered back up into the eyes of his mother. He squinted as if he was trying to focus and then fell asleep.

"He is beautiful," Celia said, taking a seat by the bed as Agnes set about tidying up. "Agnes is emotional, I can tell." Celia let out a secret laugh. "That is why she cannot sit still. But you must not mind it, for it is just her way."

"Agnes has been wonderful. You both have. I will never be able to thank you both enough for what you have done for me today. For both of us," she said and looked down at the sleeping baby.

Suddenly, Catherine felt an immense sense of peace. It was as if she knew she would never be parted from her child now, come what may. Whatever life threw at her, she would manage it as long as she had her baby with her.

"He certainly is a handsome little boy. He will fair very well in this world with a face like that." Celia smiled sadly at the sleeping infant.

"We may or may not fare well in this world, Aunt Celia, but we shall do it together," Catherine said, not knowing how else to begin to tell her aunt she would not be surrendering her baby.

"I know you are in pain, Catherine. I know this is going to be the hardest thing you will ever have to do, but …"

"I cannot do it. I love you dearly for what you have done, not just you and Agnes, but Uncle Charles too. You have all been so kind, and you have all put me first. I cannot think that anybody in this world has done so much for me, and it pains me more than I can say to hurt you. I would not wish it, especially after all you have done." Catherine

paused to wipe her tears with the back of her hand.

“Here, my sweet girl.” Celia handed her a fresh white handkerchief.

“Thank you.” It was clear that Celia was not angry with her, and something about that made Catherine feel all the worse. “Aunt Celia, I do not expect you to support me more than you have done already. I know the shame of this situation, and I would not bring that down upon you. This is mine to deal with, and I shall find a way.”

“But my dear Catherine, I could never …”

“I will do whatever I have to do to keep my little boy with me. Now that he is here,” she began and looked down into his angelic little face. “I could never part with him. It was hard enough before he was born to think of the moment when I would have to let him go, but I know with the deepest certainty I could not do it now. I care not what poverty I must live in, what low circumstances. I would even go into the workhouse to keep my child with me; that is how strongly I feel. I hope you can forgive me for all the trouble I have caused you.”

“Catherine, what I was trying to say was that I could *never* abandon you, no matter what choices you make.” Celia laid a hand on her cheek. “I do not yet know how best I can help, but I am sure Charles will be able to think of something. He really is awfully clever. That is why I married him.” She laughed, and Catherine knew her aunt was trying to put her at her ease.

She should have known that Celia Topwell would not try to shame her into giving away her child, nor turn her back on her entirely. Celia was cut from very different cloth, and Catherine gave a silent prayer of thanks that it was to Celia she had been sent when she had been disowned by her father.

“Now then, you get some rest, and Agnes and I shall fashion a letter to

be sent to your Uncle Charles today." She rose and leaned forward to first plant a kiss on Catherine's forehead, and then one on the baby's soft cheek.

"Thank you," Catherine said tearfully as Celia left her little chamber.

Catherine stared around the tiny room, its pale lemon walls reminding her of her room back home. By home, of course, she meant Ivy Manor.

The idea that she probably would never be able to go back there was a painful one, even though she knew she could not let go of her child just so that she could return. However kind Celia and Charles were, they could not possibly support the idea of having Catherine and her baby living under their roof. They were not society figures, it was true, but they were still respectable and well-respected. They would be made pariahs by association, and she could never do that to them.

But perhaps there really was a way they could help her. Perhaps she would not be entirely alone or brought so low as to find herself and her child in the workhouse.

Catherine was once again gripped by the unfairness of it all. This should have been the happiest day of her life, not one marred by thoughts of poverty and sadness and shame.

"No, my little boy, we shall think happier thoughts," she whispered to her sleeping child. "We shall imagine life as it should have been, with your Papa here and looking down at you in wonder."

And she did just that. Catherine closed her eyes and pictured herself in a beautiful chamber with bright sunshine pouring into the room. The window was open, and a cooling breeze played around the smooth skin of her face.

Then her husband, the wonderful and handsome Thomas Carlton,

made his way cautiously into the room as if he feared waking mother and child.

“Come in, Thomas. We are awake,” she imagined herself saying with a laugh at her husband’s barely concealed nervousness and excitement.

“You look beautiful,” she imagined Thomas saying as he hastened towards her and sat down on the edge of her bed. “I have never seen you look more radiant.”

“Thank you.” She smiled to herself, almost as if the whole scene was real, and she truly was looking at her beloved husband.

“And this is my son.” She pictured Thomas smiling down at their baby in awe. “This is my little man.”

“He is your little man. And see how he looks just like you, my love. See how his soft little tufts of hair have such red in them, and his eyes are such a wonderful blue.”

“But they are almond shaped and beautiful like his mother’s, see?” As she pictured Thomas’ face, it was so clear to her in every detail that she could almost have reached out and touched him.

“Then he has the best of both his parents, does he not?” She smiled and leaned back into her plump white pillows as her husband ran a hand through her hair.

“He will have your intelligence and my wit, and he shall navigate this world very well. And we must have more, Catherine. We must make brothers and sisters for him.” She imagined Thomas looking just as excited as she knew he would have if her imagination were reality.

“What shall we call him? He must have a name.”

“You choose a name for him, Catherine.”

“Henry. Let us call him Henry.”

“Henry Carlton. Yes, that is perfect.”

Catherine opened her eyes finally to see that the baby was awake again. He was staring up at her and had the most serene look on his little face. She imagined for a moment that Henry, for she had decided to name him such, had been right with her in the scene in her imagination, settling his bright blue eyes on the bright blue eyes of his father.

If only Thomas really could see him. If only Thomas had been with her there at that moment, she felt sure they would never be parted again.

Feeling her heartbreaking afresh at the loss of her one true love, Catherine knew that it was a pain that would never leave her. Her tears fell again, and she wished she could escape her own emotions, if only for a little while.

“Oh, Thomas, how did things turn out this way?” she said miserably as she held baby Henry tightly to her. “How is it that I am alone? How is it that you are not here? And how is it fair that I will love you with this dreadful intensity for the rest of my life?”

Chapter 15

Arriving back at Ivy Manor without Henry was painful. The whole journey back to Derbyshire without her child had affected Catherine more than she could ever have imagined, and she had dissolved into tears in Agnes Price's arms more than once.

As the carriage had borne the two women ever closer to home, Catherine felt a relentless stab of anxiety. She had not seen her uncle for nearly five months, and when she had left Ivy Manor for Lytham, things had been very different.

There had been a plan in place, one which her aunt and uncle had carefully devised with Catherine's very best interests at its heart. And now was the moment when she would see Charles Topwell's reaction to her willfully going against the plan.

As much as Celia had tried to reassure her, as far as father figures went, Catherine was still accustomed to a different sort of man altogether.

When the carriage pulled up in front of the manor house, Catherine felt her palms clammy and her heart beating hard. The maelstrom of fearful emotions reminded her of the first day she had arrived at Ivy Manor, heartbroken and alone, and imagining her aunt to be as punitively cruel as her father had been.

And, just as had happened on that day, the shining black front door opened, only this time it was her uncle who stepped out.

He hastened towards the carriage and pulled open the door before reaching in to take her hand and help her down.

"Uncle Charles," she said as she stood and faced him. "Uncles

Charles," she repeated, and her eyes filled with tears.

"Now then, Catherine," he said with his gentle Derbyshire accent like a warm blanket on a cold day. "I reckon you have cried enough, have you not?" He smiled. "At least that is what your aunt tells me in her letters. Her many letters." He took her hand and began to lead her towards the house. "So many, in fact, that I feel as if I have spent these last five months in Lytham myself."

"Yes." Catherine tried to pull herself together. Her uncle was going to treat her kindly; she just knew it.

"And what of you, Agnes Price?" Charles called behind him in a jovial manner. "How you are going to manage these next weeks without your gossiping partner I cannot imagine." He laughed.

"I shall have to turn to Catherine, Charles." Agnes laughed. "She will get me through it."

"How nice it is to have company again," Charles said as he led the two women into the drawing room. "Tea will be here in a minute. Sit yourselves down and be comfortable in front of the fire. It has been a cold winter here in the Peaks, but I daresay it was chilly enough on the Lancashire coast."

"There's a fair wind comes off the Irish Sea, Charles. You will be glad to have missed that." Agnes sat next to Catherine on the couch, and Charles took a seat opposite her.

Catherine was suddenly filled with gratitude. She felt surrounded by the warmth and care of a real family, with the honey-like tones of natural northern England voices and all their customary kindness. Catherine felt cared for as if all her two companions wanted in the world was her comfort and peace of mind.

If only she could stop her eyes welling with tears, but she had found her emotions so strong in the last weeks as if becoming a mother had changed her at a very deep level.

“Thank you, both.” She managed to choke the words out as Agnes and Charles looked on kindly. “Dear me, will I never stop crying? I seem to do nothing else of late, and everything sets me off.” She laughed and dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief.

“That is very normal when one has just had a child,” Agnes said, then widened her eyes and fell to silence the moment the door to the drawing began to open inward.

“Come in, Violet, my dear,” Charles called loudly to the small maid.

“Here we are.” Violet set the tray down on the table. “And I’ve put a few little cakes out too. I thought you might be hungry after your journey, Miss Catherine.” Violet beamed. “And Agnes. It’s lovely to have you both back.”

“Oh, how kind.” Catherine smiled and hoped she was not about to cry again.

She needed to appear normal as if nothing had changed. The plan, the *new* plan, relied on the appearance of normality and absolute secrecy. They would all have to get used to living their lives based on a very carefully crafted tale from now on.

Catherine wondered how easy that would be when there was such a wonderful informality between the house and staff. She could never have imagined a maid daring to speak at all when serving tea at Barford Hall; the Earl would have roared at any maid who chanced to attempt such a thing.

Catherine tried to imagine his expression if he heard any servant

addressing her as *Miss* Catherine instead of *Lady* Catherine. As much as he had never paid his daughter a moment's consideration, he would have exploded at such a thing. Likely because he would have seen it as an insult to him rather than Catherine. It would not be a matter of wrongly addressing Catherine, but wrongly addressing the Earl's daughter. The difference was subtle and huge all at once.

"They look wonderful, Violet," Agnes said, finding her voice again after the shock of almost giving the game away in the first five minutes. "Did you make them?"

"No, Mrs Hollingsworth did. But I watched her, and she promised to let me try next time." Violet was clearly excited by the prospect.

"Well, I shall look forward to trying your cakes when they come," Catherine said, practicing the ease she would have to employ from now on.

"Enjoy your tea," Violet said with a broad smile before she bobbed and retreated from the room.

"Goodness, that was very close," Agnes said, her voice full of apology. "Please forgive my stupidity."

"Do not make yourself uneasy. This is going to be an adjustment for us all." Charles gave Agnes a kindly smile. "We will get used to it; all it takes is practice. Right?" He looked from Agnes to Catherine.

"Right," Catherine said and smiled. "And I really cannot thank you enough."

"You must stop thanking me, my dear. I am the sort of fellow who wriggles under praise of any sort." He laughed. "And I think I am going to enjoy having a baby around the house. A fine little boy, no less." Catherine looked at her uncle and was sure she could see a

certain excitement on his face.

“Do you really think this can work, Uncle Charles?” Catherine spoke in a near whisper.

Catherine realized how much she had missed Charles Topwell. Whilst he had been a quieter figure in her world, playing second fiddle to the unstoppable force that was Aunt Celia, he had always made her feel welcome; at home.

“Of course it can. We all have our part to play, but once Henry and Celia are back, and the story is well enough established, life will tick along nicely, you will see.”

The plan, the second plan, had been all Charles’ work. When he had received the letter that Celia and Agnes had written between them, he had responded immediately.

The plan was clever because it was simple. Charles wrote back to Celia to tell her all of it, step by step. They were to take every part and act it out thoroughly, he insisted on it, saying that it would be easier for them all to keep their tale consistent if they lived it as best they could.

So, Celia, with Agnes peering over her shoulder in their little lodgings in Lytham, wrote a letter to her husband, telling him how the distant relative they were staying with was suddenly very ill. Celia had decided to stay on at the house to look after the woman. She had a young baby, and her husband was neither attentive nor did he provide enough to pay for a companion to keep his wife company in her illness. Celia, therefore, had decided to stay on for a while to help her take care of her infant whilst she built her strength back up again.

Charles had let the household staff know that their mistress would be gone a while longer, and the news had been received quite naturally.

After a few more weeks, Catherine and Agnes were to return home, sent away by Celia as the poor woman's illness began to worsen. Again, all very natural, and the staff had looked forward to the return of Catherine and Agnes, even if their mistress was going to be delayed.

"I know it cannot have been easy to leave Henry behind in Lytham, but you know that Celia will take the very best care of him," Charles went on as Agnes poured them each a cup of tea.

"I know she will, Uncle Charles. She is very good with him, and Henry loves her already." Catherine felt tearful again, but she was determined to hold it in this time.

"It would have been too dangerous to have Celia and Henry come back at the same time as you. It would be too easy for people to start putting two and two together. But I truly believe that this little passage of time will do much to avoid that. It gives the story time to settle into the minds of the staff and our neighbours. I am sorry for it, Catherine, but it really is necessary to our success."

"I know, Uncle Charles. And I know Henry will be coming back to me in the end."

"But not as your son, you must remember that. He is to be known as the child of one of my distant and less fortunate relatives. A child made an orphan when his mother died and his father turned his back on him."

"I understand. I am just grateful that Henry will be in my life." Catherine's voice wavered.

It had hurt Catherine's heart to know that her boy would grow up thinking her the most distant of relations. She wanted more than anything for him to know who she was, but it was too much of a risk.

A young boy growing up could not be expected to keep such a secret successfully. He could not have the knowledge that Catherine was his mother but never mention the fact outside of Ivy Manor, or in it, for the servants could never know the truth either.

It was the only way, and Catherine knew it. It was not perfect, for no life without Thomas ever could be. A perfect life would be one in which Henry got to grow up knowing both his mother and father. Even now, after all that had happened, Catherine still had room in her heart to dream that things were different.

But even if they were not, at least she would see Henry grow up. And she could be as close to him as any mother could be. She would be in his life, and he would be in hers. She would see him every day, and spend every waking moment with him. And, with the help of the Topwells and Agnes Price, she would teach Henry how to be a fine young man in a home that was full of love.

“He will be in your life, Catherine. And we are not so wealthy that we would employ a nurse, so you will get to do it all. You will need to let the maids be involved, at first, at least. That way there will be no suspicion. You must make it seem as if Henry grows on you day by day. The staff cannot see your bond to him from the very first. It is all part of the plan. Do you think you can manage it?”

“Yes, I will do whatever must be done to have Henry here. I will not let you down, Uncle Charles. Not again.”

“Young lady, you have never let me down.” Charles seemed taken aback by her words. “I should never have expected you to give up your child in the first place. It was too hard.”

“But he is born out of wedlock. He is illegitimate.”

“I cannot abide that word,” Charles said firmly. “It is the way of the world to be critical and judgemental of others. It is a stain on society that appearances are more important than truth and love. They would blame a child as if we do not all come into this world in the same way.”

“There is nothing we can do about the opinions of others,” Agnes added. “But we can work around them, can we not?” She smiled at them both conspiratorially.

“We most certainly can,” Charles said cheerfully. “You must just be strong a little longer. You will get through these next weeks with Celia’s daily letters, and you will adjust to the way of things when Henry and Celia get home. You will manage it all; I have every faith in you.”

Charles’ kind talk and belief in her made Catherine feel better. She would manage; he was right. Henry might not know she was his mother, but he would most certainly know how much Catherine loved him.

He would grow up in a home of laughter and love, never knowing a moment’s fear. Henry would always feel important to those around him, never have his opinion ignored or his own wants in life dismissed in favour of someone else’s plan.

Henry would have the things his mother had not, even if he never knew he hailed from Barford Hall and the Duchy of Shawcross. He did not need to know he was descended from Dukes and Earls; all he needed was to be loved, taught, and steered in the right direction.

And maybe one day when he was grown, Catherine would be able to tell him the truth. She might be able to let him know finally that he was not an orphan, a poor child who had been taken in and saved by the kindness of his distant relations.

One day he would know that his mother loved him so much she had been prepared to risk everything to keep him with her.

But that was a matter for many years hence. There was a long road to travel first, and Catherine had decided at that moment to enjoy every minute of it. She loved Thomas, and she always would, but she had a responsibility to raise their son in happiness, and that was exactly what she would do.

Catherine would follow the plan and follow it to the letter.

Chapter 16

Catherine had decided to make the long journey back to Hertfordshire alone. Whilst the Earl of Barford had been Celia Topwell's brother, it was clear that she had no intention of attending his funeral herself. In fact, neither Celia nor Charles Topwell had any intentions of paying their respects to Oscar Ambrose and Catherine could not blame them at all.

Not only had he treated Celia and Charles so poorly, but her aunt and uncle had objected strongly to the way he had treated Catherine also.

And when she had received word from her brother that their father had died, Catherine felt nothing. Well, perhaps that was not entirely true, for she had felt a little curiosity to go home after so many years away, and she had felt her own hopes and fears for how her relationship with her brother Philip would have fared after so long. And, more than anything, she felt a deep need to see Thomas Carlton again.

Catherine still thought of Thomas every day, could see his handsome face every time she looked at her beautiful son and knew that her feelings for him had never changed. She loved Thomas with all her heart and with the same ferocity of the very day they were parted eight years before.

When the letter had come, Catherine had been sitting out on her favourite bench in her aunt and uncle's beautiful grounds. She had been enjoying a late summer's afternoon as she watched Henry clambering about in the only tree she allowed him to climb.

It was a sturdy tree with low, broad branches, one that was easy for him to get into and out of without incident. She always watched him like a hawk, knowing that Henry was as keen as mustard to get to one

of the taller trees and test his skills somewhere other than the tree he had known how to climb since he was five.

“Aunt Catherine, this tree is too easy,” he complained as he peered out at her through the thick leaves. “This tree is for babies.”

“That is just silly, Henry.” Catherine laughed as she shielded her eyes from the sun and squinted at his fine little silhouette against the bright blue sky. “Babies cannot climb trees.”

“You know what I mean, Aunt Catherine,” he went on, and Catherine stifled another laugh when she realized that he was beginning to whine and complain a little.

Whining and complaining did not suit Henry, and when he did do it, it always amused her. But Henry had a sensitive heart, one that Catherine would protect at all costs, and so she was careful not to laugh at him or say anything that would undermine his burgeoning confidence in himself.

“I *do* know what you mean, Henry,” Catherine said gently. “But I would like you to wait until you are a little older before you try any of the bigger trees. I know that you are very good at climbing, but my nerves are not so very good at watching. And so you see, you would be doing me a great kindness by sticking to that tree for now, my dear.”

“Alright then, Aunt Catherine,” he said in the most adorable, proud-little-boy fashion.

No doubt he liked the idea of doing something to protect Catherine’s feelings and soothe her nerves, and the feeling of pride at that moment clearly outweighed the excitement of a new tree.

“Thank you, Henry. It is always nice to be kind to somebody else, is it

not?"

"I always like being kind to you, Aunt Catherine." Henry sat himself down on the broadest of the branches, and Catherine grinned to see his skinny legs swinging back and forth.

"And why do you like being kind to me, Henry?"

"Because I love you, Aunt Catherine," he said in a perplexed tone which suggested she ought to have known that already.

"And I love you too, Henry," Catherine said and felt the familiar tightening of her throat.

From the moment Henry had been old enough to speak, Catherine had forced herself to get used to his mode of address. So many times over the years she had been tempted to tell him everything, feeling sure that he would be pleased to know that his beloved Aunt Catherine was actually his mother.

But Henry was still just seven years old, and once he found himself comfortable in whatever company he was in, he talked non-stop. Henry liked nothing better than to chatter, and even when he was climbing his little tree, he generally talked through the whole effort.

He was such a happy, personable little boy that he reminded her more and more of Thomas. He was sensitive, it was true, and yet he had a certain confidence with people, just like Thomas had always had.

Henry waved to her from the tree, and she smiled and waved back, watching him carefully. As always happened, she drifted off into thoughts of Thomas and how his talkative and confident nature had led him to approach her in the first place.

Had he been any different at all, they likely never would have spoken,

for Catherine would certainly not have had the courage to have approached him herself.

“Have you seen Henry anywhere?” Celia called out in an extraordinarily loud stage-whisper as she approached Catherine from the kitchen door.

It was a little ruse that the two women had played over and over, ever since Henry had taken to climbing the tree. And Henry, despite being a bright little boy, never seemed to realize that they were making the whole thing up for his benefit, again and again.

Catherine smiled and let her eyes stray to Henry who quickly put a finger to his lips and shook his head vehemently, beseeching her to remain silent.

“I have no idea, Aunt Celia. I cannot think the last time I saw Henry. Perhaps it was this morning,” Catherine said loudly and smiled when she heard Celia chuckle, low and quiet.

“Well, perhaps I will sit here with you for a while until he appears,” Celia said and settled herself down on the bench at Catherine’s side.

Catherine could immediately see that Celia held an unopened letter in her hand, although it was face down, and she could not see to whom it was addressed.

“What a beautiful day it is today, Celia. It reminds me that summer will not be here forever.” Catherine sighed. “As warm as it is, there is a quality about the light in late summer; it is very different from early summer. A little more yellowy, I think.”

“Yes, I know what you mean,” Celia said thoughtfully. “And it is a reminder, I think. A bittersweet one.”

“We must make the most of it then.” Catherine risked a glance in Henry’s direction and could see that he was busy stripping the leaves from one of the branches, fully occupied, and having forgotten that the two women were there at all.

“You look after him so well, my dear,” Celia said, changing the subject suddenly. “He could not have had a better governess if we had employed somebody. He really is a clever boy, is he not?”

“He is, and to teach him has been a wonderful experience for me. It keeps us together all the time and in such a way that I never feel I have to explain my constant attention to him.” Catherine smiled at Celia, and her eyes strayed to the overturned letter once more.

“Everything comes as second nature now, my dear, and I can hardly remember a time when we struggled to be careful of everything we did and said. The feelings of trepidation seem so far away now.”

Celia was right; they had fallen into a very easy arrangement. In the beginning, Catherine had hoped rather than believed that Charles Topwell’s plan would work. But they had all stuck to their part, the four of them supporting one another throughout, each acting as a watchman to the others, all of them mindful not to do or say the wrong thing.

For Celia, Charles, and Agnes, of course, the whole thing had become easier much more quickly. For Catherine, however, there was always the temptation to change things a little between herself and Henry, to let him know just how closely related they were. There was always that tiny twinge, that little ache, every time her son referred to her as his aunt.

But, all in all, the plan had worked, and Catherine was more grateful than she could ever have expressed. Her life, whilst not complete over those last years, had been content enough. Henry was the most

important person in her world; he was her child, and she would protect him like a lioness with her cub.

“You came home very early from the evening buffet with your friends yesterday, Catherine. Is everything alright?” Celia always approached such subjects with care and caution.

“Yes, I am fine, I promise.”

“You enjoyed yourselves?”

“Yes,” Catherine said and felt shabby for lying. “Well, no, not really,” she said and frowned apologetically.

“What happened?”

“The same as last time, I am afraid. Constance and Stella are very kind, and I know they have my best interests at heart, but I do wish they would stop introducing me to hopeful men of a certain age.” Catherine sighed dramatically, and Celia burst out laughing.

“Oh dear, was he as bad as all that?”

“Worse, and it was not one hopeful gentleman, but two.”

“Well, as you say, your friends have your best interests at heart.”

“They certainly think they do, Aunt Celia. But I have told them time and time again that I am not interested in marrying, and I wish they would just believe me. I think that they are under the impression that I am simply objecting because I am embarrassed to find myself unmarried at seven and twenty.”

“Seven and twenty is not old, my dear. And you really are very beautiful, Catherine. It is hardly surprising that there is no shortage of

gentlemen who are doubtless only too pleased to be introduced to you."

"How kind of you, Aunt Celia. But I truly do not want to be married. I never want to marry, not now."

"Because of Thomas?" Celia had not mentioned Thomas for a long time, and it did something to Catherine's heart to hear his name spoken aloud.

"Yes, because of Thomas. Always Thomas."

"Do you still love him?"

"As much as I ever did, Celia. I know that I will love Thomas Carlton until the day I die."

"Have you never heard anything about him since you came here?"

"How could I? My brother has never written, and I dare not write to him for fear of what my father will do. Poor Philip," she said and felt the familiar ache of missing her brother. "And for the same reason, I could not write to Thomas either. And he has never tried to find me, has he?"

"Not that you are aware of, Catherine. That is not to say that he has not tried. You cannot know what difficulties he has experienced since you were last in Hertfordshire."

"And I suppose I shall never know," Catherine said miserably.

"I am not so sure that is true," Celia said and turned the letter so that the handwriting on the front could be seen. "For this is post-marked *Hertfordshire*, Catherine." Celia lowered her voice and let her eyes stray to the contented little Henry in the tree.

“Hertfordshire?” Catherine’s voice came out in a wheeze of shocked excitement.

She leaned forward and peered at the handwriting without taking the letter from her aunt at all, almost as if she dare not touch it. She could see that it was addressed to her and addressed in a hand that was so familiar that even the passage of time could not disguise it.

“My goodness, Aunt Celia, it is from Philip.”

“Are you sure?” Celia sounded impressed. “You can tell his handwriting from a few lines of address?”

“I would know it anywhere,” Catherine said and sat still as a statue, still not reaching for the letter at all.

“Catherine, are you going to open it?” Celia sounded pleasantly impatient.

In the eight years she had been at Ivy Manor, Catherine had come to know her Aunt Celia very well indeed. She could be described, at best, to be inquisitive and, at worst, to be rather nosy. But it was always done very gently and without malice and was always mildly amusing.

“Well, I suppose I ought to,” Catherine said and realized that her hands were shaking as she reached out to take the letter from Celia. “Look at me; I am trembling.”

“It is understandable. I know how you have missed your brother.”

“If I am honest, I fear the news.”

“News? What news is it that you fear?”

“I suppose I fear my brother telling me that Thomas has become married, although I suppose that is silly. Philip has not written to me at all these last years, and it would be an unlikely catalyst for his sudden communication, would it not?”

“Probably the easiest thing to do would be to open it and read it. There can be no benefit in conjecture at this stage, Catherine.”

“Quite so,” Catherine said and swallowed hard as she opened the letter.

She read it for some moments, although it was but brief. She could never have imagined a letter from Philip being so brief after so many years, but there was no doubt a reason for that. And the news, whilst it did not upset her, surprised her. It was curiously the last thing she had expected, and she felt a little stab of guilt when she realized that she was relieved to discover that it was news of her father’s passing, not news of her old love marrying.

“He is dead. My father is dead,” she said simply and looked at Celia.

“Goodness me, I am surprised to hear that. My brother was always very hale and hearty, certainly not the sort of man one would expect to die whilst relatively young.” Celia looked more interested and thoughtful than devastated. “I must admit, I do not feel a great deal about it.” She shrugged and looked at Catherine.

“If I am honest, neither do I. Not for the man himself, I mean,” Catherine said thoughtfully. “But there are a whole host of other emotions that will need to be picked through sooner or later, emotions entirely unconnected with my father and his passing.”

“I understand, really I do.”

“Well, I will have to get to the bottom of my own heart sooner or

later, for Philip wishes me to attend our father's funeral."

"And will you go?"

"Yes," Catherine said and nodded firmly. "But not for my father's sake; for Philip."

Just days later, as the last of the post carriages she had taken led her ever closer to Barford Hall, Catherine knew that it was not just for Philip's sake that she was making that journey. She needed to know, once and for all, what had become of her first and only love.

Chapter 17

Thomas arrived in the churchyard more than an hour before the funeral service was due to start. Lady Morton had given him the specifics, despite urging him to exercise caution, possibly not even go at all.

She was right, of course. Whilst Thomas was not an enemy of the Ambrose family, at least not in his own estimation, the man who was being buried would have certainly seen it that way. And, as much as he despised the old Earl of Barford, it was *his* funeral.

He would be no more expected to turn up at it than he would have expected Philip Ambrose to attend the funeral of the Duke of Shawcross. Not that Thomas' father showed any signs of weakening that he had seen.

He stared out across the graveyard from his vantage point in the trees and wondered if he would be seen. Thomas knew he would have a good view of the service itself, for he could clearly see the mound of earth, rich and brown, piled high next to the freshly dug hole.

It made him shudder to think of such preparation, even though he knew there could be no other way to do things. But he could not escape the curious feeling as he looked at the mound of earth and the hole in the ground. It would soon contain the remains of a man; a man he had hated, yes, but a human being who had lived and breathed but days before.

It reminded him of Pierce and the day they had lain his own brother to rest in that very graveyard some seven years before. He remembered well how he had seen the mound of earth as he had approached the family plot at his father's side. He had been too bound in grief to even feel anger at his father's self-contained, proud, and

pompous display. The anger had come later.

Thomas blew out a great sigh. The day was warm enough, but there was a chill whenever the breeze drifted through the trees and found him in his hiding place. He was wearing black garb so as not to appear disrespectful if he happened to be discovered. Still, despite the thickness of his black tailcoat, he was beginning to wish he had worn a great coat over the top.

Standing on the edge of the graveyard out of sight was going to be a fairly sedentary business, and Thomas would soon feel cold. Especially when the service began, and he dare not move at all for fear of drawing attention to himself.

Of course, in the end, Catherine might not be there at all. If he did not see her, would he really wait to see the man who had ruined his life lowered into the ground? He thought not.

Thomas could find no warm feelings for the old Earl of Barford, but he had long since relinquished all ideas of revenge and bitterly nursed grudges. It was enough for him that he did not like the man, he did not need to make that feeling more active. After all, he had seen just what such feeling could become and exactly where it could end if it went unchecked.

Thomas had never truly forgiven himself for his brother's death. He knew, of course, that none of it would have happened if Pierce had not betrayed him in the first place, but he knew very well that there had been an opportunity to prevent the tragedy which ensued.

Had he forgiven Pierce, there would have been no need for his brother to chase him so recklessly and at such a speed as he made his way to Stromlyn Lake.

Still, Thomas had other things on his mind as he stood in the cover of

the trees and thick shrubbery and revisiting old ground would not help to bring Pierce back; it was done.

Thomas embraced himself a little as another cool breeze swept through the trees and made the leaves rustle and the larger branches sway rhythmically. Would she come?

Whilst he had known immediately of the Earl's passing, and soon after of the date for the funeral, Thomas had heard nothing at all about the attendance or otherwise of Catherine Ambrose. If she was *still* Catherine Ambrose, that was.

Lady Morton had no information on Catherine whatsoever and never had in all the time she had been away. She had been as much in the dark as anyone else in the county. The truth was that people rarely spoke of Catherine Ambrose, most of them fearing the wrath of the Earl of Barford.

Over a surprisingly short amount of time, Catherine appeared to have been forgotten, although he was sure their plight was still a good source of occasional private teatime gossip.

Lady Morton had been a great friend to Thomas from the day she had created a little story to explain his absence from the room when he had wanted to speak to Catherine secretly. He smiled sadly to himself as he thought of how much had changed since that day, and just how many years had passed with only himself and Lady Morton to remember it all.

Of course, Catherine would remember every part of it if she had a mind to. Thomas knew that so much might have changed for her since she had been away to whatever part of Derbyshire had been her home for eight years.

She was a beautiful woman with such intelligence and a magnetic

personality; surely, she would be married by now. For all Thomas knew, she might not even live in Derbyshire anymore. She could be anywhere.

His only hope of setting eyes on her again was on that very day, the day of her father's funeral, he was sure of it. That idea filled him with the most terrible dread that she would not come at all, and all hopes of ever looking upon her beautiful face, if only from afar, would be dashed forever.

Married or not, Catherine would certainly not be obliged to attend her father's funeral. The man had disowned her entirely, so even a small consideration in his will was unlikely.

But there was Philip. Surely, she would come to the church at least to support the brother she had so loved. Still, even that relationship might have changed, and Philip might still not know exactly where it was his sister had been sent. In those circumstances, he would surely not have been able to track his sister down at all.

Just as Thomas had convinced himself that he was chasing his own tail, there was some movement across the graveyard. He peered out to see that carriages were drawing up outside the church and mourners were beginning to gather.

There suddenly seemed to be an awful lot of people making their way through the graveyard to the Ambrose family plot. There were certainly more mourners than a man of such foul manners and character would deserve, that was for certain. Still, like the funerals of many a titled man, most in attendance were there out of a mixture of societal duty and curiosity. Maybe that would one day be his own fate, for he would undoubtedly be buried a Duke, barring any further tragedies in the Carlton family.

Would his own graveside one day be lined with the curious? The

dutiful?

At that moment, he saw her. She was wearing black but had chosen not to wear a severe black veil to cover her face, and for that he was grateful.

Thomas leaned forward, leaves brushing the sleeve of his coat as he tried to get closer as if a few inches would make his view of Catherine so much clearer.

As far as Thomas could see, Catherine was as youthful and beautiful as she had been on that last, wonderful, terrible night; the night that had haunted him every day since he had scuttled away through the semi-darkness from the Barford estate before anyone else could see him.

Her brown hair looked smooth, and it shone in the sunshine. He could just make out the almond shape of her eyes; the eyes he would never forget as long as he lived.

Thomas fought an urge to stride out across the graveyard to be at her side. How many times he had thought of their reunion, an affair imagined in his head to be so romantic and full of joy. It had never occurred to him that the next time he saw her would be at a funeral to which he would not be welcome.

Thomas felt his heart lurch as she saw her link her arm through that of a tall, slender man. The very thing he dreaded was to see her at the graveside on the arm of her husband. But he quickly realized that the man was none other than Philip Ambrose, the new Earl of Barford.

He was right, Catherine had come to support her brother on that day. It was doubtful, even though he had not spoken to her for so long, that she would truly be there to mourn her father.

Almost feverishly, Thomas scoured the mourners looking for someone

he did not recognize. It was a lengthy task, but he was most intent. There were no men around her at the side of the grave whom Thomas did not recognize and, after several minutes of squinting into the crowd, he was sure he knew the rest of them by sight if not by name.

Of course, that did not mean that Catherine was not married. She might well have a husband who could not or would not attend. Still, he hoped that idea was as unlikely as it seemed.

Thomas could not make out the Reverend's words exactly, catching just snippets of phrases in the common liturgical tones of most holy men. He could not take his eyes off Catherine, wishing he could see her more clearly. He could see her beautiful face, but not well enough to make out her expression. He had no way to read her feelings at that moment.

He *wanted* to read her, to know what was going on inside her head and heart. It was all he had to support her with, even if his support would, by necessity, be unknown and anonymous.

As he stood in the cover of the trees, Thomas wondered what they would say to each other if they had that moment to themselves. Would he tell her how relieved he was to see no husband at her side? Would she smile and reach for him, evaporating the last eight years as if the two of them had never been apart?

He imagined her touch and found that it was not difficult to do. Thomas had paid no heed to any other woman since Catherine had left, despite the fact he was engaged to be married to Lady Eleanor Barchester, daughter of the Earl of Winsford.

He had only agreed to the engagement after years of grinding down by his father. Within days of Pierce being buried, the Duke had fully turned his attention upon Thomas, keen to groom him for his role as the heir to the Duchy. For the Duke of Shawcross, there had been no

period of mourning his first-born son. He had barely missed a step from one day to the next, barking instructions at Thomas as if he had always been the heir and not the spare.

With Pierce gone, and the tremendous weight of guilt on his shoulders, Thomas had found every day torturous. And the idea that he would never find Catherine after his failed attempt in Derbyshire had stripped him of all hopes of a happy or even vaguely contented life.

He had quietly railed against his father, never truly arguing with him, but making no attempt to search for the bride his father had been insisting upon for so many years.

Thomas was perpetually reminded of his duty to marry a woman of good blood and to sire an heir for the next generation. It was almost pathological, his father's desperation to project his seed and family name into a distant future he himself would never see.

For himself, Thomas could not have cared less. Whilst he had taken on the duties of the heir, he had only done so in some sort of morbid respect to his brother. In no time at all, Thomas realized the weight of constant pressure and lack of self that his brother must have felt for all those years, and it made him feel guiltier than ever.

Although Thomas had always been blessed with more than his fair share of intelligence, he wondered at how easily he had ignored everything Pierce had had to endure over the years. What a strain it must have been for him to suffer his father's constant attention and boorish instructions on every move he made.

It was simpler for Thomas in many respects because he cared little for his father's opinion of him, unlike poor Pierce to whom it had always been so important. Or important up until the moment he had betrayed his brother and realized his father's good opinion could never, ever be

won.

But still, it had been far from easy. Thomas was making ready for a role he did not want and a title he cared nothing for. But the fact was that there was nothing else for him to do but succumb to it all. There was nowhere else for him to go, and if he wanted a living at all, he would just have to grit his teeth and bear it.

And gritting his teeth had been exactly what he had been doing ever since he had finally given in to his father and agreed to court Lady Eleanor Barchester. He had little interest in her and had easily seen her for exactly what she was; a title hunter. A young lady who would be a *Duchess* if she had anything to say about it.

She was confident without being particularly intelligent or talented, and only beautiful if overdone costumes and characterless features were your want in life. To Thomas, she was a symbol of his lack of autonomy in the world.

And now, perhaps, she had become something else. As Thomas' mind raced with possibilities, wild notions of real meetings with the woman he still loved more than life itself, perhaps Lady Eleanor Barchester would be an obstacle to his happiness; an inconvenience of the highest order.

The change in the Reverend's tone caught Thomas' attention and drew him back into the present moment. The service was drawing to its conclusion, and the mourners were moving just a little.

Philip Ambrose threw a handful of dirt onto the coffin, as was traditional. Catherine, however, had clearly chosen not to participate in any way and stood stoically with her hands at her side.

"Good for you, my love," Thomas said under his breath and smiled.

She was still strong; she was still his Catherine.

Thomas had moved just a little in a bid to get just one inch closer to her. The movement, however, caught the eye of one of the mourners; Catherine.

She looked up sharply, seeming so strange as the rest of the congregation stared down into the grave. She was the one difference, the only person who stood out. She had broken the coherence of the group, but he was the only one who could see it.

Thomas dared not move a muscle, but she continued to stare over, her gaze unbroken.

At that moment, Thomas knew that she had seen him. Even if it had been for just the briefest moment, he was certain that she knew it was him.

Chapter 18

It had been a relief for Catherine to get away from the so-called mourners and back to Barford Hall. She had not imagined for a moment ever seeing that place as a refuge again, but now, less than a day after she had arrived from Derbyshire, she did.

When she first arrived from Derbyshire, her carriage drawing up outside the front of the hall, Catherine had felt a familiar old sense of doom settle around her like a cloak. It was so familiar, in fact, that she realized she must have lived her whole life there with that very feeling down in the pit of her belly.

She peered out of the window at the gleaming stone front and was strangely amazed by the sheer size of the hall. How vast and unwelcoming it looked to a person who had spent the last eight years within the welcoming walls of Ivy Manor.

Catherine stared up at the windows, too many to count, and wondered if anybody peered back out at her from within.

“Allow me, My Lady.” The driver had opened her door and was ready to help her down.

“Thank you,” she said meekly and felt a little shudder at the formal address.

She had been only Catherine in her home in Derbyshire, never *Lady* Catherine. Sometimes *Miss* with the servants, but never, ever *My Lady*. She had not wanted it, and Celia and Charles Topwell had seemed relieved by that. Theirs was a small establishment, and their comfortable and warm staff would have felt awkward and much less confident.

And for Catherine, it had been such a wonderful break with tradition. She had never realized how very isolating a title could be until she no longer used one and found herself in such warm and constant company.

Catherine stepped down with the help of the driver and stood on the gravel apron just staring at the great wooden door. She felt lost as if she did not belong there, and she did not. Her legs would not propel her forward to take her to the stone steps leading up to the door. She was a guest, a stranger, not family.

Worse still, despite knowing her father to be dead, she could hardly trust it and imagined him flying at her, his colour high and countenance furious as he demanded to know what she thought she was doing there.

“Catherine?” came a familiar voice behind her.

Catherine shrieked and spun around, fully expecting to see the angry-faced father of her imaginings bearing down upon her.

Of course, he did not, and she gave a great embarrassed sigh of relief to see Philip standing there.

“I am so sorry, Catherine. You are a little earlier than I expected, and I fear I was not inside the house ready to receive you.”He turned and looked back towards the stables from where he had just come. “I am just returned from town. Forgive me.” He smiled at her, but she could see a little unease in it.

Philip looked as cautious as she felt, and she knew he was waiting for some cue from her. She felt like a child again and looked at him as she always had. As if they were in trouble of some kind and silently awaiting the physical manifestation of their father’s wrath together.

“He really is dead, is he not?” Catherine asked and then smiled as she realized how ridiculous her question was.

“Yes,” Philip said and slowly began to grin. “Would you care to see him? He is laid out in the library of all places.”

“Good Lord, no!” Catherine said and raised a hand to her mouth as Philip laughed.

“How wonderful it is to see you,” he said and advanced upon her with his arms outstretched and all signs of awkwardness gone.

The moment she was in his embrace, Catherine relaxed entirely. She had missed Philip more than she could ever say, and as suddenly as she had relaxed, she was in floods of tears.

“I know. I know,” he whispered and turned her towards the front of the hall before quickly turning back to the driver. “My man will be down in a moment to take Lady Catherine’s things.”

“Very good, Lord Barford,” the man said, and Catherine bristled a little.

Philip had simply been *Lord Ambrose* when she had last been home, and it seemed so strange now to hear him addressed with what was her father’s title.

“Of course. Lord Barford,” she said and was glad of a distraction from her tears.

“It will take a good deal of getting used to,” he said and gently took her arm to lead her into the hall. “We shall go into the drawing room, and I will send for some tea and sandwiches; what do you say?”

“Thank you. I am so tired suddenly.”

They walked in comfortable silence all the way in, stopping only so that Philip might help her out of her cloak and bonnet on the way. The drawing room when she entered had clearly not changed at all in all the years she had been away.

The same dark green and red prevailed to make it the most unsettling space. It was all too severe, too dark, and the determinedly masculine decoration made the immense room seem very much smaller than it really was.

Tea was finally served to them by a maid she recognized but whose name she could not remember. The woman looked at her with shy warmth, and Catherine, now more used to servants who were not terrified of their own shadows, smiled broadly.

Only a day later, and Catherine could hardly remember what she and her brother had talked about in that first meeting of theirs. She had been a tumult of emotions on the inside and had only a vague recollection that she had told him of Celia and Charles' kindness to her over the years.

Being truly exhausted, Catherine had finally begged to be released so that she might sleep. Philip, as understanding and sweet as he had always been, helped her up the stairs and told her that she need not force herself to come down to dinner. She was to rest well, and some food would be sent up to her chamber later.

Catherine had awoken the next morning with a sense of relief. It was as if she had survived her first night back at Barford Hall and so could trust that the man who had made her so very unhappy really was in his coffin in the library, awaiting his own burial.

She knew it was a little irreverent to allow such positive feelings on the day she was to attend her own father's funeral, but she was

determined not to let guilt and shame permeate her life any more than it had done already. Catherine had truly had enough of such emotions and was fully intent upon burying them alongside the old Earl of Barford that day.

The funeral had been everything she was expecting, or almost, at any rate. The mourners had neither surprised nor disappointed her with their eager attendance, and only the curious appearance of Thomas in the trees on the other side of the graveyard had made the event suddenly unusual.

Catherine had entertained the feeling of being watched throughout the service but, seeing nothing in the distance, she tried to dismiss it. But when Philip had leaned in to throw the customary handful of earth on her father's coffin, she had seen a movement over by the trees and recognized Thomas immediately.

She knew she had not exactly recognized him by sight for he was well hidden. But she had seen enough movement to know it was him; she recognized his size and shape, not to mention the fact that she was certain she could actually feel his presence.

For the remainder of the funeral, she had maintained her study of the trees, knowing he was in there somewhere and desperate to catch a real glimpse of him. Her heart was pounding, and her mouth was dry, almost as if they were truly about to be in one another's company for the first time in years.

All the way from Derbyshire, Catherine had both hoped and feared seeing him again. He had never left her thoughts, especially since Henry reminded her of him daily. Henry's red-brown hair was the exact shade of his father's, and his eyes were an identical pale blue, so identical that one could be forgiven for thinking they had been plucked from Thomas' own head.

Only Philip taking her arm to lead her back to his waiting carriage had drawn her attention away, and she followed him blindly, hardly able to concentrate on a word all the way back to Barford Hall.

Now that they were once again in the oppressive green and red drawing room, Philip looked at her with concern.

“You saw him then?” he said quietly.

“Saw him?” Catherine was utterly surprised; surely he could not mean Thomas?

“In the trees.”

“Yes, I did see him. His presence took me by surprise,” she said and cleared her throat before continuing, “although I did not see him so fully that I could be sure.”

“It was him,” Philip said. “I had wondered if he would find his way there today.”

“Well, I daresay he is curious.”

“For a man to hover on the edge of a funeral suggests more than simple curiosity, Catherine.” Philip laughed, and she enjoyed his teasing tone.

“Perhaps,” she conceded.

It was almost impossible for Catherine not to question her brother there and then on everything he knew of Thomas in the last eight years. Seeing Thomas, albeit briefly, had awakened such strong feelings in her that she felt off-kilter, unwell even.

“So, our aunt and uncle really are good people?” Philip said as if he

was simply carrying on the conversation of the day before. “Our father’s sister fell a little further from the tree, so to speak?”

“She fell in a different field altogether, Philip. A different world, almost.” Catherine smiled and was grateful for the diversion.

“And what of Derbyshire? What of Little … Little …?”

“Little Hayfield.” Catherine laughed. “It is the most beautiful little hamlet. Just a few houses and an inn. There is not even a church.”

“So, you have lived as a heathen, sister!” Philip was greatly amused, and his determined good mood reminded her so much of their life before they had been so cruelly separated.

“No, there is a church in Hayfield, the neighbouring village. I have always struggled not to call it Big Hayfield. Anyway, it is a large village within minutes of Ivy Manor.” She laughed and could hardly believe they had just buried their closest living relative. “So, I did not live as a heathen. Although I must admit, I was not on speaking terms with the Lord for some time. I simply went through the motions, right down to noiselessly mouthing the words of the hymns instead of actually singing them.”

“You used to do that when we were small.” Philip’s eyes were bright; he seemed happy and at peace to have his sister home again.

“Yes, I did, but I never realized that you knew it.” Catherine flushed happily.

“Was it very awful at first?” He looked suddenly serious.

“Yes, but through no fault of Aunt Celia or Uncle Charles,” she said and experienced a little flash of her feelings in those first days in Derbyshire. “I missed you so much that I cried for a good part of the

awful journey from Hertfordshire. I wanted to write to you, but Aunt Celia advised me against it. Not through any cruelty on her part, but because she knew from bitter experience how spiteful and pernicious our father could be. She did not want a letter from me to fall into his hands and for you to suffer some punishment on account of it."

"I understand." Philip's eyes looked glazed, and she hoped he would be able to contain his emotion. If he could not, she would be sunk. "And I had tried everything to find an address for our aunt. I did not know what I would do with it, but I decided it would be enough for me, to start with, to simply know where you were."

"But you could not discover it?"

"There was nothing to be found until after he died and the attorney gave me the details. Before that, I scoured father's study every time he left Barford Hall, but I daresay he knew that I would. And I did not even know our aunt's name, neither first nor last, so I knew I would have no hope in tracing them by some other means." He cleared his throat loudly. "I felt so helpless."

"As did I. But you must let it go, Philip. There was nothing either one of us could have done about it. That was how our father worked; that was how he did things. He was always at his most effective when devising punishments, but even he surpassed himself back then. No doubt he congratulated himself daily for the completeness of my separation."

"He was that sort of a man. I would like to be able to tell you that I finally saw some remorse for the way he had treated you, even for the way he had lived his life, but I cannot. He was the same man on the day he died as he had always been." Philip shrugged. "Still, I suppose it spared us the pain of loss that we might have felt for a better father. It is small consolation for all that preceded it, but it is consolation nonetheless."

“Yes, I suppose it is. I felt nothing as I looked down at his coffin.”

“Neither did I.”

“It is done now, Philip, and we shall be strangers no longer.” Catherine smiled, staring into his hazel eyes, so like her own.

“Will you come home now, Catherine?” Philip said, and she realized he spoke hopefully.

“Goodness, I had not thought of it.” Catherine felt suddenly unsteady.

She could not leave Celia and Charles behind, nor the safety that had been set up there for herself and her son. They had a story, and it must be stuck to at all costs.

“Well, I shall not press you, but I should like you to know that this is your home whenever you would wish it. I have missed you more than I can say.”

“And I have missed you. But I suppose I have a life in Derbyshire now. It is a less formal and less privileged life, but it is a good one, and I am fond of it.”

“Do you have a particular friend up there?” Philip approached the subject so delicately that she almost laughed.

“No, I have no understanding with any man and have never had if that is what you are asking.” She grinned.

“I see.” He looked down.

“What is it?”

“Nothing, nothing at all.”

“Philip, it might have been eight years, but I can still read you like a book.”

“It is just that so much has changed since you were here.” He looked so awkward that Catherine felt sure she knew what was coming.

“Thomas Carlton is married,” she said, making her question a statement.

“No, but his father has pushed him into an engagement. At least I think he has, for the lady in question is not someone I can imagine interesting Thomas much.” Philip spoke slowly and thoughtfully. “Although it is true that I have hardly laid eyes on Thomas since you left, and our fathers both saw to it that we never managed a moment’s conversation.” When Catherine said nothing, he went on, “But he has never bothered himself with any courtship since you left. That is why I can only assume it is his father’s doing.”

“But why would it be? His father never gave any thought to Thomas. He is the second son. The *afterthought*.” She said the last quietly, remembering again how Thomas had cheerfully described them both as such in happier times.

“Because Thomas will one day be the Duke.”

“What?”

“His brother died in an accident some years back. And if I know anything about Thomas, he will have been fending off his father’s attention ever since.”

“But we both know how hard that can be to maintain,” Catherine said miserably, marvelling that she did not feel a moment’s sorrow for the

fate of Pierce Carlton.

“Catherine, it is only an engagement, and we both know they can be broken.” Philip gave her a mischievous smile as if they were conspirators in a great plot.

“Not so easily when one’s father is a determined man of title. Especially when that father has an old feud to continually feed.”

Catherine’s mind raced with possibilities she knew could never, ever transpire. She loved Thomas Carlton with all her heart, just as she had always done, but it was her responsibility, and hers alone, to protect the little boy his father had no idea existed.

Chapter 19

In the end, Catherine had settled to the idea of spending a fortnight with her brother at Barford Hall before returning to Derbyshire. He had complained a little at first, but she had promised to be a regular visitor in the future, and so he had acquiesced.

But Philip had wanted her to have some place in Hertfordshire life and so had insisted that she accompany him to a late afternoon buffet at Lord Vinton's country mansion. Catherine, not wanting to dampen her brother's somewhat adorable enthusiasm for the two of them to be out in society together again, agreed with more alacrity than she felt.

Catherine had not been inside Lord Vinton's home since the night of the dance he had held there so many years before; the night when Thomas Carlton, a man who ought to have been her natural enemy, had contrived the first ever secret meeting between them.

The wonderful, unforgettable evening that would let loose a chain of events that neither one of them could have anticipated.

Despite the fact that she liked Lord Vinton very much and would be pleased to see him again after so many years, Catherine did not quite feel ready to be out in society again. She doubted she would ever really be ready for the society in Hertfordshire ever, but she would do her very best if only for Philip's sake.

Lord Vinton's mansion was as welcoming as she remembered it, as was the man himself.

"Good afternoon, Lady Catherine. What a true pleasure it is to see you." The ageing lord smiled at her warmly, welcoming her without making a great fuss of it.

It was almost as if it had only been a matter of weeks since she had last seen him, and Catherine was grateful for it. Lord Vinton had kindly set the tone for the rest, and since their host had not made a three-act opera out of her return, nobody else did.

“Lord Vinton, you look as hale and hearty as ever, Sir.” Catherine’s words were genuine. “And it is a pleasure for me to see you again too. Thank you kindly for inviting me this afternoon.”

“You are always most welcome.” He narrowed his eyes like a contented cat, and Catherine thought she liked him all the more.

His gentle greeting had given her confidence, and she walked into the drawing room of Vinton Hall with less trepidation than she might have felt otherwise. And yet, by the time she had spoken, albeit briefly, to a number of her old acquaintances and neighbours, Catherine felt a little drained.

So much had changed, and Catherine knew she was a very different person now. She did not quite fit in with her old life anymore, and she knew she never would. The truth was that she did not think she really wanted to fit in with her old life anymore.

As much as Catherine liked Lord Vinton, she realized she liked him for his easy manner and lack of ostentation. But his guests, for the most part, were not blessed with the same fine qualities, and Catherine realized that she had not missed the old competition that was rife in fine society.

Derbyshire, or at least Little Hayfield, was a different place, and she thought that she would much prefer to be walking the steep climb up Lantern Pike, the great green mass of a hill she had first set eyes upon on the day she had arrived at Ivy Manor.

“How are you managing?” Philip said to her halfway through the

afternoon.

“Oh, I am managing alright.” Catherine smiled at him and found she was not keen to upset him by having him know just how much she would have liked to leave. “I always like the food that Lord Vinton lays on.”

“Yes, good and filling without being at all silly or trying to impress,” Philip agreed wholeheartedly.

“Lord Vinton would do very well in Derbyshire. There is a nice sense that he is very down to …” Catherine broke off and stared open-mouthed across the room to where Thomas Carlton had just walked in.

“Catherine?” Philip said and narrowed his eyes. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, I … Yes, I am perfectly alright,” she said and laughed nervously when she realized just how unconvincing she sounded.

Philip spun around to see what she was staring at before turning back to her with a look of understanding on his face. He smiled at her kindly and reached out to lay a hand on her arm.

“Is it so difficult to see him again?” Philip said in a near whisper.

“I think it is seeing the woman he is to marry that is the worst. I do not think I could bear it, and I wish that they had not come. Perhaps it is a simple thing for him to have moved along with life, but I was the one who was banished; I was the one who suffered, and were I wearing *his* shoes today, I most certainly would not have arrived here with my fiancée.” Catherine realized she sounded a little bitter. “I would have had more tact and kindness in my heart than that.”

“I know you would have, my darling sister. But I am bound to tell you

that the woman who has walked in at the same time as Thomas Carlton is not, in fact, his fiancée. It is a simple coincidence, and I think he hardly knows the woman at all."

"Oh, thank heavens for that," Catherine said and let out a great sigh. "All of this is hard enough as it is without the idea that I will be confronted with such a thing. Perhaps the sooner I get back to Derbyshire, the better."

"Please, please do not go. I only have these two weeks with you as it is, and it is little enough time. Perhaps I ought not to have insisted that you come out with me this afternoon. I should have realized the potential for such upset. I should have realized what fears you must have left the house with. Please, forgive me, sister."

"I daresay I cannot stay indoors forever, even if I am only here for two weeks. And since I have promised to be a regular visitor, I shall have to get used to the sight of Thomas Carlton and the woman who is to be his wife. Sooner or later, anyway."

"From the way he looks over here, I would not be so sure that Lady Eleanor Barchester will ever be Thomas Carlton's wife. Not, I daresay, that *that* will be her biggest concern. Not being the Duchess of Shawcross will likely be the larger part of her disappointment in that question." Philip laughed, and Catherine smiled, knowing that all he wanted in the world was to cheer her up.

"I do not think that there will be much to stand in the way of Thomas Carlton's wedding, especially given the tenacity of his father. The Duke is no different from our father, certainly not a man who would be reasoned with. Let us not forget; I am not an ordinary woman, am I? I am the daughter of the Duke's greatest enemy, and things will never be any different."

"Yes, but …" Philip began.

“No, Philip, it must be accepted. I have had enough pain and disappointment in my life to realize that I do not want any more. And to set myself up with hopes of something that will never, ever happen, would be the greatest of follies. I understand why you would want to give me hope, brother, and hope is a very fine thing until it is taken away. All that hope when that happens is just another cruel blow. Forgive me; I do not wish to be morbid, especially when you are trying so hard to keep my spirits up.”

“There is nothing to forgive. I understand what you are saying entirely, and I cannot tell you how much I wish things were different for you.” Philip looked as upset as she felt. “Let us give it a few minutes, and then we shall leave, Catherine.”

“No, there is no need to do that, Philip. All I need is a few minutes to gather myself, and I shall behave normally. If I am to be your visitor here, if I am to regain the old friendship that you and I once had, I will need to get used to seeing Thomas. There is no sense in putting the thing off any longer, for it has already been put off these last eight years.” Catherine took a steadying breath. “No, I will speak to him if I get the opportunity of it. That is the worst of it; once that is done, I shall be free of that fear at least.” She smiled at him reassuringly, and Philip returned her gaze with admiration.

“Then perhaps there is no time like the present, for he looks over this way continually,” Philip said and raised his eyebrows in question.

“Then I shall do it now.”

“Would you like me to come with you?”

“No, I will manage.” Catherine gave him a smile which she hoped was reassuring and then turned to see if she could catch Thomas’ eye.

When she did turn, it was to find him looking directly at her. He seemed to stare for a moment, no expression whatsoever on his face whilst Catherine, for her part, felt as if her heart was thundering in her throat.

She had thought of his face every day for the last eight years, and yet her imaginings could not compare with the real thing. He was as heartbreakingly handsome as ever, although there were some tiny differences. Thomas had aged but aged well. He did not look older than his years, but neither did he look younger. His hair was still the vibrant red-brown it had always been, the colour that his son had inherited.

He was dressed well in pale cream breaches and a dark blue waistcoat and tailcoat. She wondered about her own appearance and was glad that she had chosen to wear a long-sleeved dusky pink gown that suited her complexion very well indeed. She had worn black for only one day, choosing not to mourn her father.

Not that it mattered greatly what she wore; it was not as if she was trying to catch his eye, for it was too late for such a thing. Too late, and too impossible.

But her attention to her appearance that day had given her a little confidence and made her feel much less hopeless and forlorn than she might have done without it. Suddenly, without warning, Thomas began to stride towards her.

“Forgive me for hovering in the graveyard at your father’s funeral.” Of all the things she had expected Thomas to say on their first meeting after so many years, *that* was not one of them.

“You need not explain, and there is nothing to forgive. I only attended myself to make sure that he was in the ground.” She shrugged.

“My goodness, you are the same.” Thomas laughed, his pale blue eyes wide.

“Perhaps I am only the same in some of the essentials, Thomas. But I suppose a good deal has changed in other respects. I suppose we are none of us who we used to be.” She shrugged again.

Catherine was amazed that she could speak to him calmly and without any of the tears that she had imagined would erupt the moment she was with him again.

Perhaps the idea of his engagement had finally closed the door on it all for her. She knew that he had never wanted to see her go, and she had never doubted his love for her back then. But he was soon-to-be married, and perhaps it was as well to come to terms with it as soon as possible. Perhaps there would be something steadying in knowing that there would be no more meetings by Stromlyn Lake, no more stolen kisses.

“You have hardly aged at all, Catherine. The air in Derbyshire must be very fine indeed.”

“I am bound to say that I have never seen a more beautiful county than Derbyshire.” She smiled.

“And where was it that you stayed?”

“I stayed with my aunt and uncle, as you know. They are a Mr and Mrs Topwell, and they live in a small manor house in a tiny hamlet called Little Hayfield. It is in the High Peak area in the north of the county.”

“Tell me, is it far from Glossop?” he said, and she found herself surprised that he knew anything of Derbyshire at all.

“It is just four miles from Glossop,” she said and looked at him quizzically. “In fact, Glossop is the largest town for a few miles and really the place we would go to for much of what we needed.” Thomas wore a strange expression, and she thought that he did, perhaps, look a little upset. “Is something troubling you, Thomas?”

“I suppose it is,” he said quietly. “I had not realized how close I had come.”

“I beg your pardon?” she said quizzically.

“I made it as far as Glossop and no further.”

“You went to Glossop?” Catherine said in amazement.

“Not long after you had gone, Catherine. I had decided to come and look for you, but I am afraid that I had no information whatsoever. I made it as far as the High Peak and began to ask around, but not knowing anything about your aunt and uncle, not even their names, I did not do very well. I had only your name, and I am afraid that nobody in Glossop had yet heard of you. If only I had continued my journey just four more miles,” he said and seemed genuinely distraught.

“But you could not have known that, Thomas,” Catherine spoke gently, a little sideswiped by her feelings. She had always hoped that Thomas would come for her, little knowing that he had actually attempted it. “With no information to go on, you might just as well have been in another country altogether for all the luck you would have had in finding me. But thank you for trying, Thomas. I know it was a long time ago, but I am very grateful for your efforts.”

“I wish I had found you,” he said, and Catherine had the dreadful sense that the conversation had moved too far too fast.

It was as if the eight years between them had not made them strangers as ordinarily it might have done. There was no real awkwardness to speak of, and certainly no preamble to the things which really needed to be said but should have come much, much later.

And yet something about it all made her panic a little, for Catherine had the greatest sense that she could very easily have her heart broken for a second time, and she was not keen to relive such a dreadful experience.

“In the end, we cannot change the past. You tried, Thomas. You did your very best to find me, and I shall never forget that. But we have new lives now, have we not?” Catherine took a slow and deep breath and decided to start as she meant to go on. “And I believe I am to congratulate you, Thomas. My brother tells me that you are soon to be married.” Catherine smiled as serenely as she could even though she could feel the beginnings of that heartbreak once again.

From that point on, Thomas’ conversation became a little vague, and Catherine marvelled at how quickly they fell into the old ways of society, the polite and somewhat disengaged questioning and feigned interest in trivialities.

By the time Catherine came ready to take her leave and return to her brother, Thomas looked a little desperate. There was something in his face which suggested the conversation had not gone as he had hoped, that it had somehow wandered away down a path he had not been expecting it to take. There was disappointment in his countenance, she knew, and there was nothing that she could do about that.

“Well, I ought really to return to my brother and spend a little of the afternoon with him. Would you excuse me?” she said with a polite smile.

“Yes. Yes, of course,” Thomas said and bowed as if by instinct.

Something about it hurt her. She knew he had not intended his actions to do so; it was just that it spoke loudly to her of the barriers that were now between them. A formality that had not even been there at the start of the conversation had somehow worked its way in, barged its way between them almost as effectively as their fathers done all those years ago.

“Good afternoon, Thomas,” she said as serenely as she could manage and inclined her head before turning to leave.

“Forgive me,” Thomas said suddenly, and she spun around to look at him. “Sorry,” he went on and seemed a little tongue-tied. “Tell me, are you staying in Hertfordshire? Are you to return to Barford Hall for good?”

“No, I am not to return. I leave for Derbyshire at the end of two weeks.”

“I see,” Thomas said and bowed again before releasing her.

Chapter 20

“You have not touched that tea, Thomas. Really, it must be almost cold.” Lady Eleanor Barchester spoke in the sort of offended manner that would only have been appropriate if Thomas was expecting *her* to drink the cold tea.

And it was not as if he was at Winsford Hall, her father’s country estate, where he might expect to be admonished for impolitely neglecting to drink his tea at the correct temperature. He was in his own drawing room, and he wanted more than anything for Lady Eleanor Barchester to simply go away.

“It is of little matter, Eleanor. I do not want the tea anyway,” he said and gave a broad shrug.

Thomas realized that he had taken on some of his father’s character traits when it came to dealing with people he simply did not want to be with.

It had come upon him little by little, and he knew that he would never have imagined ever being so. Thomas had always been a cheerful and polite young man, one who always took the time to chatter with dowagers at social events and entertain old men who wanted to tell him the same story time and time again. In many ways, he had prided himself on his approach to life and, not only that, but he had enjoyed it.

Thomas rose suddenly to his feet and strode across the room to the drinks cabinet where he helped himself to a glass of sherry. He did not bother to ask Eleanor if she would like one, for it was so early in the day that he knew it would be but a matter of moments before she made some judgemental comment or other.

There was much about the character of Lady Eleanor Barchester which had irritated him over time, but her tendency towards priggishness was the worst of them. It was the one which always needled him greatly and created the most intense internal response.

“It is a little early for sherry, is it not?” Eleanor said in her most disapproving tone, right on cue.

“Is it?” he said with sarcastic innocence, hearing an old phrase rolling around and around in his head and fighting hard against the temptation to simply say it.

A prig will always make you a present of his opinions. Oh, how he would love to voice it.

“I knew you would be in a curious mood today.” Eleanor, her bright blonde hair fixed in controlled, immaculate ringlets, studied him closely as he retook his seat in the armchair opposite the couch where she sat.

Eleanor really was a beautiful woman, although there was very little about her that seemed natural. Her appearance was of the utmost importance to her, and he had more than once had to wait in the drawing room of Winsford Hall for her to finish primping and preening before they could attend whatever little event they were destined for.

She was a popular woman, and he supposed he ought really to be grateful to have her, for she was not only beautiful but the daughter of a wealthy Earl who would undoubtedly settle a great dowry upon her when she married.

Of course, his father would already know exactly how much. The Duke of Shawcross and the Earl of Winsford would have sorted the whole thing out to their own satisfaction and nobody else’s. Thomas

could not think of it without the familiar bitterness sweeping over him. Even as a man of title, it was quite possible to have little control over one's life.

"I do not think I am in a particularly curious mood. I just do not want tea, that is all." Thomas knew he sounded offhand and even a little arrogant, but he knew better still that it would hardly have any effect on Eleanor.

"I wish you had never gone to the afternoon buffet at Lord Vinton's," she said pettishly.

"Why should I not attend an event with Lord Vinton? He is a friend, is he not?" Thomas could feel his agitation rising.

"It has nothing to do with Lord Vinton," Eleanor snapped.

"Indeed?"

"You know very well what I am talking about, Thomas. Or *who*, I should say."

"Enlighten me."

"It is true then that she was there?"

"Who?"

"Must we play such games?" The fact Eleanor was all business and no emotion came as no surprise whatsoever to Thomas.

"I am sorry, you are right," Thomas said, deciding that he would behave a little better than he was doing. Not for her sake, but his own. "And yes, Lady Catherine Ambrose was there yesterday. It is the first time I have seen her in eight years, and I daresay I am in something of

a curious mood. Forgive me." He gave her what he hoped was a warm smile.

The truth of it was, he felt absolutely exhausted. He wished there was one person in his family with whom he could talk openly about Catherine, but there was not.

He had said nothing himself to Eleanor about her but was perfectly well aware that she knew of his old affection. He had no real idea where she had found her information on the youthful love that existed between Thomas and Catherine, not to mention how it all ended, but he had never bothered to ask.

Whilst the county did not discuss it in front of him, he had no doubt that it had been discussed over the years. People liked to gossip, and a love affair that ended in one of the parties being sent into exile was certainly grist to the mill of many folks.

"And you have never seen her once in all these years?" Eleanor asked suspiciously.

"How could I have done? She was somewhere in Derbyshire, and that was all I knew. If you have ever been to Derbyshire, you will know what a difficult county it is to search." He did not bother to tell her that he had waited in the graveyard behind the trees to catch sight of his old love at her father's funeral; Eleanor would never have understood such a compulsion.

"You searched then, did you?" She made it sound like an accusation.

"Yes, almost eight years ago, long before I knew you, I went to Derbyshire on a fruitless search for Catherine Ambrose. I tried my best, but I could not find her anywhere."

"Your father could not have been happy about that."

“My father never knew about it.” He shrugged and stared at her, almost daring her to run to the Duke with a tale. “The only person who knew anything of it was Pierce, and I rather believe he chose to keep that to himself in the end,” he finished quietly.

“But what were you going to do if you found her? It would hardly have helped, would it?” Eleanor was suddenly a strange mixture of curiosity and annoyance.

“I wanted to persuade her to run with me. To elope. To go to Scotland so that we might be married without the interference of our fathers.” He sighed. “But that is a long time ago now, Eleanor. I do not see where this conversation is getting us.”

“I cannot imagine that the daughter of an earl would be happy to have lived in such financial straits. Perhaps it is just as well that you did not find her and be forced to suffer her rejection.” Eleanor seemed disproportionately triumphant.

“Perhaps,” he said in a flat tone, choosing not to tell her that Catherine was a better woman, that Catherine had the courage to run and would have done.

“And did you speak to her yesterday?”

“Of course I did. She is an old friend of mine, and I have not seen her for years. You can hardly imagine that I would ignore her, can you?” He wanted the conversation to be done, but it was clear that Eleanor was having none of it.

“I cannot imagine that you have much in common anymore. You were rather young, were you not, when you had your little friendship?” Thomas felt patronized by her words and knew that he was meant to.

“We were old enough to be considered adults, Eleanor. And people do not change so greatly in a few years. We both suffered as a result of our family’s behaviour, and I cannot think of a greater thing to have in common in this world.” Thomas could hear his own annoyance and wished now that they were at Winsford Hall so that he could at least get up and leave.

“And what did you talk about?” He could hardly believe the question.

“All manner of things. Mostly Derbyshire and Catherine’s life there, all very normal for somebody who has just returned from so far away.”

“Returned? Does that mean she is to stay?” Eleanor sounded outraged.

“No, Catherine is only due to stay for a fortnight,” he said gruffly.

“Good,” Eleanor said, and finally her cheeks flushed a little; clearly, she had not meant to say that out loud and with such gusto.

“Why? Why is it good? Why does it matter to you? You are not acquainted with her, are you?” Thomas felt truly annoyed.

How he wished he had never given into his father’s perpetual insistence that he marry. How could it be that the best of the procession of women who had been paraded before him over the years was Lady Eleanor Barchester?

He knew that she was not the best; she was just the only one in his eyeline on the day that he had finally given in. He had no particular regard for her, but having never had any regard for any woman who was not Catherine Ambrose, he thought it mattered very little who he married in the end. And it was as simple as that. It was as unremarkable as that.

“We do not need any petty interferences in our lives, Thomas. We are

to be married soon, and I am sure that your father expects you to keep sight of that. I know that he is very keen for us to have a date settled at the earliest opportunity."

"And how do you know that?" Thomas said, knowing very well that both Eleanor and her father, the Earl of Winsford, often kept the Duke's counsel.

He had often thought of the three of them talking together, plotting and arranging, and he had often imagined them as conspirators. No doubt there had been some nervousness at the return of Catherine Ambrose that the three of them had needed to discuss at some point. Presumably, his father would be speaking to him about it sooner rather than later. It could only be a matter of time before he was edged into a wedding date of *their* choosing.

"Because my father and your father are the firmest of friends," Eleanor said in a manner which was almost boastful.

It was on the tip of Thomas' tongue to say *the truth is my father would eat your father if he thought it would do him some good*, but he did not say it.

"Well, I think we have exhausted this conversation, have we not?" he said in a firm voice that was intended to put an end to it.

"I hope so," she said significantly.

Thomas looked out of the drawing room window and could see the sun slowly sinking in the sky. Evening would soon fall, and the Earl of Winsford's carriage would mercifully spirit Eleanor away.

Chapter 21

The day began warm and bright if a little chilly, and Catherine woke with a sense of happiness and excitement in her heart for the first time since she had been back at Barford Hall.

After much cajoling, Philip had convinced her to stay with him a little longer. Catherine had been keen to get back to Henry, finding that their two-week separation had been extraordinarily difficult. Worse still, she knew she could not use Henry as her reason for tearing back to Derbyshire.

She had been very careful in her description of Henry, not mentioning him until some days into her stay when she had been discussing in more detail the household of Ivy Manor.

It had broken her heart to do so, for her son was the most important person in the world to her, and she had wanted to speak about him from the very moment she arrived.

She had so wanted Philip to know that he had a fine nephew, a handsome boy who was clever and funny and who liked to climb trees. And, had the circumstances been a little different, Catherine knew that Philip would have been thrilled to hear the news.

And so it was that she had introduced the idea of Henry very gently, retelling the tale she had told so many times over the years of a sickly relative of her uncle who had passed away, leaving the care of their baby to Celia and Charles Topwell.

Philip had listened with interest, keen to know everything about the relations he had yet to meet. And Catherine had told him how she must return to Derbyshire to help Celia and Charles with Henry. She explained how she had acted as his governess and how much she had

enjoyed teaching the young boy. The whole thing had given her a sense of purpose in life, and she had found that she was missing the boy as well as her aunt and uncle.

To make her need to return home most complete, Catherine had also furnished Philip with details of almost daily excursions to Lantern Pike and the surrounding countryside, not to mention Agnes Price, and other ladies she considered to be her friends.

In the end, Philip had excitedly told her that she might extend the invitation to Charles and Celia Topwell, for he should very much like to meet them anyway. When she had told him that they could not possibly come away with Henry, Philip had said that the boy would be more than welcome to come with them.

He wore her down in a most gentle way, not with bullying or cajoling as her father might have done in years gone by, but with hope and excitement and a deep need to know for himself the sort of life she had led in the last eight years.

If she was honest, it was rather a wonderful sort of wearing down, and a most unusual one for it was born of love and care more than anything else.

Whatever the cause and circumstances of the visit of her son to Barford Hall, Catherine was simply glad that he would be there. She had missed him more than she could say, and she did not suffer any of the old fears that they might be discovered in their tale, for it had been a story they had rehearsed and practiced for so long that it had almost become the truth.

Or a version of it, at least, for Catherine would never forget that Henry was her son, even if he never knew it himself. But she did not suffer any anxiety that any of her party would give the whole thing away.

Catherine had missed her aunt and uncle greatly, and Henry even more. How she would love to see Celia again and be able to discuss the events of the last weeks at length. In the end, Celia, Charles, and Agnes were the only ones who knew the absolute truth, the only ones with whom she could discuss every matter of her heart.

Philip was a wonderful brother, and she could not imagine a kinder or more attentive one existed in the world. But he did not have the truth of it all, even though that was far from his own doing, and she knew she could not let him into her world entirely. She thought back to when they were children and could hardly imagine a time where she would ever have thought that was possible, and yet still it had happened.

If only Celia had been there already, then Catherine could have talked through the events of the day before. She had not told Philip that she had seen Thomas out walking in the woods not far from the edge of the Barford estate, for she had not wanted him to worry.

Seeing her so downcast after the afternoon buffet at Lord Vinton's home had clearly upset Philip, and Catherine did not want to put him through any more. Despite the fact that he was her older brother, Catherine wanted to protect him from it all.

With the knowledge that her son was on his way from Derbyshire and would soon be in her arms again, Catherine had gone out into the afternoon sunshine for a walk. She felt bright and happy and could not wait to see Henry's happy, chubby face, and pale blue eyes.

She had been thinking about Celia and how strange it would be for her to see her own childhood home again after so many years. No doubt Celia's memories of Barford Hall were as diverse and confusing as Catherine's were, perhaps even more so.

And it was being so lost in thought that she had not heard or seen Thomas approaching. He appeared quite suddenly as if from nowhere, and Catherine was so startled that she shrieked.

“Good heavens, I really am sorry. Truly, I thought you had seen me,” Thomas said with his arms spread wide and his palms facing forward.

“Forgive me; I had not seen you. I was lost in thought and not concentrating at all,” Catherine said, and for a few moments, she felt amused, just as she always would have done.

It was as if time had been folded somehow, and she had slipped along a crease into the past where such a thing between them would have been funny. It took a moment or two for the last years to run after her, chase her down, and pin her beneath their crushing weight.

“So, you are just out for a walk, Catherine?” His question brought her back down to earth because he asked so tentatively.

She could not help comparing him to the Thomas she had known, the smiling, often cheeky, confident young man who spoke without any hint of caution in his voice. They both were very different now.

“Yes, it has been so long since I walked these woods, and I am bound to say that it has not changed at all.” She smiled and wondered at his presence there.

It was on the very edge of her brother’s estate, a fair distance from the Shawcross estate and not a place she imagined as a first thought for Thomas in choosing a walk. She frowned a little as she thought about it, and it was clear that Thomas picked up on her curiosity.

“I have not been this way for many years myself. I suppose seeing you the other afternoon brought back a lot of memories, and I was riding out and thought that I would wander a little further, as it were. I hope

you do not mind."

"I do not mind at all. It is not Barford land, although I am bound to tell you that my brother would not mind in the slightest. Now that my father is dead, I think it is fair to say that you are quite safe on or near the Barford estate." She laughed.

"Safe as long as my own father does not hear of it." He shrugged and smiled at her broadly, returning a little to the man she remembered him being. "For we still have one party to the old feud, do we not?"

"I daresay, but is he so intense now that his adversary has gone?"

"I have not asked him, but knowing old men as I do, I should imagine that he is. When a person has been pigheaded for their entire life, I do not think it changes nearer the end. I have an awful suspicion that it simply gets worse and worse, more entrenched." He turned to look further into the woods before looking back at her and holding out his arm for her to take. "Would you care to walk with me for a while?"

"Yes, thank you," Catherine said, wanting that simple touch more than anything and knowing in her heart that every step she took arm in arm with him was a step further into pain.

And yet, despite her own good sense and deep understanding of the way of things, Catherine could not have walked away from him at that moment if her life depended on it. She loved him so much and knew that she always would.

She linked her arm through his, and the years were peeled away like the layers of an onion. It felt so familiar and wonderful, and it took every ounce of self-control not to lean her head on his shoulder for a moment.

"I tethered my horse on the edge of the woods. If you care to walk

with me that far, my trusty steed and I will walk you back again." He grinned, and it was as if nothing had ever changed.

Catherine knew that she ought to be thinking about his upcoming marriage to Lady Eleanor Barchester, to the pain that she would undoubtedly feel when that event finally took place. But she had had enough pain and sorrow, and if all she had in the world was a single afternoon of determined denial, a few ridiculously carefree moments with the only man she had ever loved, she was going to take it with both hands and push away the consequences at all costs.

"That sounds like a nice idea," she agreed, and they set off along one of the narrower, less used pathways through the trees.

"Were you still a determined walker in Derbyshire?" Thomas opened up a line of conversation.

"Oh yes, and the truth is one *has* to be very determined to even think of setting off for a walk in the High Peak. In one direction or another, there is always a steep hill to be tackled. I must admit that I have grown quite strong in that respect and have found Hertfordshire surprisingly flat since I returned. And I am so used to an afternoon's walking to be an effort, albeit a very pleasant one, that I cover twice as much ground here now as I used to as a much younger woman." She laughed.

"No doubt if we were to go to Stromlyn Lake, you would race down that steep drop with ease, not to mention coming back up again. You would leave me red-faced and gasping for air." He laughed.

Catherine laughed also, but she had not heard Stromlyn Lake mentioned for so long that it was quite startling to hear the words.

"You still go to Stromlyn Lake, Thomas?" she said quietly.

“I have not been for years,” he replied. “After you left, I used to go every day. For months and months, I went with determination, never missing my daily excursion no matter the weather.”

“And then you stopped?” Catherine felt a little pain at the idea that his daily vigil had ceased in less than a year; it was curiously insulting, even though she knew that was ridiculous.

“Yes,” he said and turned to look at her with such a pain filled expression that she drew to a halt.

“Thomas?” she said and stared into his pale blue eyes. “What is it?”

“I was on my way to Stromlyn Lake when Pierce died. I have not been able to go there since.”

“I see,” Catherine said, knowing that she had never truly forgiven Pierce Carlton for the interference which had cost her so much. “Forgive me, I was aware that your brother had passed away, but I do not know what happened.”

“We had argued, as we had done constantly since his betrayal,” Thomas began as if setting the scene for his story. “Well, Pierce did not argue, I argued. Pierce had spent month upon month apologizing to me and trying to atone for what he had done. Only I would have none of it, you see.”

“I am not surprised, and I do not think that you can blame yourself for that,” Catherine said in a harsher tone than she had intended.

The very idea of Pierce Carlton had made her suddenly cold and a little unfeeling.

“Ah, but I am afraid that it was not so simple in the end,” he went on sadly. “You see, whilst I never truly forgave it, I knew exactly why he

had done it. You know as well as I do what it is to grow up in a household with a bullying, dismissive father. Well, it was no different at Shawcross Hall, and unlike me, it affected Pierce and pushed him to such lengths that would be unimaginable to another person. I am not making excuses for him, not spurious excuses at any rate, but I can tell you with certainty that what Pierce did had nothing to do with hurting us; he wanted our father's approval. I do not even think he thought about the two of us until the consequences of his actions became horribly clear."

"I see," Catherine said, hoping that she was not expected to suddenly canonize Pierce Carlton and let go of the pain and hurt of the last eight years as if it had never happened.

As far as she was concerned, Pierce was guilty. It did not matter to her that they would undoubtedly have been found out in the end; she was not inclined to think in such circles at that moment. But she could see the anguish that his brother's death still gave Thomas, and she certainly did not want to do or say anything that would hurt him.

"I could see true remorse in him for the pain he had caused us, but still I would not have it. I would not accept his apology, nor would I willingly converse with him. I treated him as if he were dead to me."

"I am so sorry." Catherine let her hand slide down his arm until she found his hand and gripped it.

"And on that last day, still I would not have it. I walked away from him and then set off on my horse at speed for Stromlyn Lake. His determination to have things settled between us had grown to a point that he could not ignore, and so he gave chase. He knew I would be heading to Stromlyn Lake, and he tried to cut me off by riding through the fields. But his horse threw him, and he landed badly. I saw the whole thing, and I have not been able to escape the idea that I killed him. From that day until this, I have wished that I had found it in my

heart to forgive him before it was too late."

"Oh, Thomas," she said and finally leaned against him.

Despite her misgivings, she truly wished that things had been different for the brothers. She had never liked Pierce, but if he had been seeking redemption in the end, was she really right to think he did not deserve such a luxury?

Thomas immediately wrapped his arms around her and embraced her tightly and in silence for several minutes. Catherine knew that things had moved too quickly and in a direction that could never be supported, and yet she could not stop herself. She could not extricate herself from the embrace she had never thought she would feel again.

When they finally released one another and began to walk again, they continued to do so in silence for a while. They were both lost in their thoughts, and yet Catherine knew that they could only have been thinking about the same thing. There was no doubt in her mind that Thomas was remembering their love, their carefree love, just as she was doing.

"I cannot bear to think that you are to leave in just a few days," Thomas said, suddenly breaking the silence.

"No, I am not to leave just yet. I am to stay just a little longer for my family is coming at Philip's invitation from Derbyshire."

"Your aunt and uncle?" he said and looked at her, his pale blue eyes wide with interest.

"Yes, Celia and Charles Topwell. In truth, they have been as parents to me, and I already miss them more than I can say." She laughed. "You cannot imagine how my mind tortured me all the way from Hertfordshire to Derbyshire, the things that I assumed my father's

sister would be capable of. But from the moment I arrived, I was treated with nothing but kindness, warmth, and love. For every bad thing that happened, that was so great a consolation."

"And I am very glad to hear it, Catherine. I cannot tell you the times I wondered how you fared and how you were being treated."

"They are the most understanding people I have ever met, more understanding than I could ever explain in words."

"I do hope I am able to cross paths with them during their stay in Hertfordshire," Thomas said genuinely.

"Yes, I am sure you shall," Catherine said, and already her mind was beginning to race.

She knew that she must accept this afternoon for what it was, be grateful for their moments of closeness, and then let it go.

She knew she ought not to be making plans in her mind, hoping for the best when she knew that it was not going to happen. And then there was Henry; she really did not want to risk Thomas meeting him. What if there was some innate sense within Thomas and he would know immediately that Henry was his son? How could she go on? And yet how could she not tell him? How could she deny both Thomas and Henry the right, the very real right, of knowing one another?

Staring out into the distance, Catherine felt relieved to see a horse tethered to a low hanging branch. It could only be Thomas' horse, and so they would be heading back towards Barford sooner rather than later.

A large part of her did not want to leave Thomas, but reality was beginning to settle around her once more, and she knew that she could not keep her heart safe if she did not accept it.

“Well, it looks as if we are heading back,” Thomas said dolefully.

“Yes, I daresay it is time for me to make my way back to my brother.”

Catherine had gone through every moment of their encounter several times, enjoying it one moment, fearing the next.

She spent the rest of the morning pacing back and forth, trying not to think of Thomas and instead simply looking forward to the arrival of Celia, Charles, and her beloved Henry. Their kindness and care could be the only thing to comfort her and keep her from making a dreadful mistake.

When she finally heard the sound of carriage wheels on the gravel outside, Catherine set off through Barford Hall at a running pace, her heart pounding with excitement.

Henry was the first out of the carriage, running towards her with a wide smile on his beautiful, chubby face.

“Aunt Catherine! Aunt Catherine!” he shouted as he threw his little arms around her, almost knocking her clean off her feet.

Catherine could hear Philip bounding down the stone steps behind her and knew that she must be careful not to cry too much, not to show the sort of emotion that would give her away as being a mother. And yet it was so hard; she wanted to hold tightly to Henry and never let him go again.

“How lovely to see you, Henry,” she said brightly, blinking hard. “And how quickly you jumped down out of the carriage on your own. I think you have grown since I last saw you, for you are becoming a very big boy.” She ruffled his red-brown hair, and he grinned at her.

“Aunt Celia said this is the house you grew up in, Aunt Catherine. I think it is the biggest house I have ever, ever seen!” he said excitedly, and Catherine could hear Philip chuckling behind her.

“Well, let me introduce you to the master of the house, my own brother Philip,” she said and turned Henry around to present him for introduction.

“This is Philip Ambrose, Henry. He is the Earl of Barford, you know,” Catherine said with a smile when she saw Henry’s eyes widen. “And Philip, this is Master Henry Topwell, ward of Celia and Charles Topwell.” She laughed at her own amusingly dramatic formality.

However, when she saw the look on Philip’s face, her laughter caught in her throat. She knew at that moment that her brother would not be so easily fooled. More than that, she knew that he was perfectly well aware of *exactly* who Henry Topwell was.

Chapter 22

“I had forgotten how beautiful the grounds are here, Catherine,” Celia said a little whimsically as the two of them sat on the lower terrace in a companionship that would have been entirely peaceful had Henry not been halfway up a tree and calling down to them to look at him.

“Yes, but I am bound to say it seems a good deal more peaceful now that my father is not here,” Catherine said and looked up just in time to see Henry about to move up another branch. “Henry, no,” she said firmly.

“But Aunt Catherine,” he said in loud complaint.

“Henry, that is as high as I want you to go today. Do not forget; this is higher than you have ever been before. Just take a moment to enjoy it and recognize your achievement; everything comes little by little.”

“I wish it would not,” Henry complained but dutifully stayed where he was. “Everything happens so slowly.”

“You will not say that when you get my age, Henry,” Celia said, and Henry chuckled, seeming for all the world to have understood the joke.

“He has such cheek,” Catherine said and tried not to laugh at her son’s antics.

“A little like his father if I remember truly everything you told me about Thomas Carlton.” Celia smiled, and Catherine loved her all the more.

She had never shied away from talking about Thomas, and never in anything other than favourable terms. Celia had never done or said

anything with the intention of making Catherine feel ashamed for the child she had given birth to out of wedlock. She had blamed neither Catherine nor Thomas for the matters that were out of their control, and she had never regarded Henry as anything other than a human being with the rights of every other human being in the world.

They only had this story by necessity, not as an attempt to shamefacedly hide Henry away, and Catherine would always love them for it.

“So very like his father. Perhaps he is more like his father than I had ever really considered. I mean, I could always see Thomas in Henry’s face, from the moment he was born and you placed him in my arms, Aunt Celia. I could see that little tuft of red hair and those beautiful blue eyes. But I had not realized quite how anybody else would be able to see the resemblance, I must admit.”

“But Philip took it all very well, did he not?” Celia raised her eyebrows.

“He was startled; that much is true. And who would not be? And he told me that it was not just that he could see Thomas Carlton in Henry, but he could see a little of my own looks also.”

“Yes, there is much in Henry’s face which reminds me of you.” Celia held her hand as they sat on the bench looking up into the tree where Henry was now fully absorbed in picking off tiny bits of bark.

“It was a shock to Philip to see Henry standing there, but he is not shocked *by* Henry if that makes any sense,” Catherine went on.

“It makes perfect sense. He is not scandalized by Henry’s existence.”

“He is not at all scandalized. The moment we were alone, I spoke to him about it immediately. I made it very clear that I am not ashamed,

nor am I apologetic, and Philip said that I had no need to be. He said that if father had not been such an evil man, Thomas and I would have been married and that we were parted through no fault of our own. Really, I do not know if I deserve such a fine brother as Philip, for I could tell that he meant every word of it."

"He is a very fine young man indeed, and you most certainly *do* deserve to have a fine brother. And I have no doubt he thinks of you as a very fine sister. Look how he would not let you go and insisted that Charles, Henry, and I come to Barford instead. I can tell by the way he talks that he has missed you as much as you have missed him these last years, and I wish I had known you both as children. I wish I had been able to be an aunt to you when you needed me most," Celia said with a whimsical look.

"But Celia, you *were* an aunt to me when I needed you most. Not just an aunt, a mother."

"You must stop, or I shall be in tears." Celia laughed, and it was clear that she was very grateful for such a wonderful compliment, especially knowing that it was utterly heartfelt.

"Yes, I do not want to have you pink and tear-stained for the afternoon of bridge, Aunt Celia." Catherine turned a little on the bench to look at her. "You do want to go, do you not? I do not want you to think that you must. But I do think that you would like Lady Morton ever so much; she was always very kind to me when I was a young woman, very open-minded and open-hearted. She reminds me a little of you, and I cannot help thinking that the two of you would get along famously."

"I am very much looking forward to an afternoon out, and even more excited at the prospect of meeting this Lady Morton you keep telling me about. Have you seen her since you have returned?"

“No, this is to be our first meeting. And if I know Lady Morton as well as I think I do, she will be in tears and flapping this way and that like a mother hen.”

“Then I really am looking forward to it. I do so like to meet a woman like myself. It is very much easier, is it not? Less complicated somehow.” Celia chuckled. “And I cannot help hoping that I get to set eyes on this Thomas of yours. After all, did you not once tell me that he is also great friends with Lady Morton?”

“Yes, they always were great friends.” Catherine laughed when a little memory came back to her. “I remember once Thomas told me that Lady Morton had provided him with a little subterfuge one afternoon so that he might have a few moments’ conversation with me in private without his brother knowing it. She is all kindness and a little mischief, and I like her very much.”

“I like her already. And is Philip to come with us?”

“Ah, I had forgotten to tell you,” Catherine said and lightly slapped her forehead with an open palm. “Neither Philip nor Uncle Charles are coming with us. They have decided to go to the far end of the estate where the little lake is and have an afternoon of fishing.”

“I might have known it,” Celia said with amusing annoyance. “Your uncle will do anything to get out of a social engagement.”

“But he does like fishing, Aunt Celia. And they are both keen to have Henry with them, and he is already very excited.”

“Your uncle is a lovely man, my dear, but he is not above using a child to get his own way.” Celia smiled in a manner which gave away her deep love for her husband. “Still, we ladies shall manage, shall we not? In fact, perhaps we will have a little freer gossip without the men around.”

“That is precisely what I thought, Aunt Celia.”

Later that day when they arrived at the home of Lady Morton, that fine woman did not disappoint. Her eyes were already brimming with tears. She took both of Catherine’s hands in her own and just looked at her silently for some moments as the first of her tears rolled down her cheeks.

“My adorable girl, you look as young and as beautiful as ever. Dear me, but I have missed your company.” Lady Morton, not at all bothered by the fact that there were several guests behind Catherine and Celia waiting to be admitted into the drawing room, finally flung her arms around Catherine and held her tightly.

For her part, Catherine had not expected to be quite so touched by their reunion as she appeared to be and soon found that she was blinking hard in an attempt to keep her own tears at bay. Lady Morton really was so very nice and one of only a few friends that she had been allowed to keep as a young woman.

“And I have missed your company too, Lady Morton. But my father is gone now, and I may visit Hertfordshire whenever I choose. I am a free woman again, and we shall spend as much time together as we are able,” Catherine whispered into Lady Morton’s ear.

“Forgive me, but I have never been so relieved to hear of another’s passing as I was to hear of your father’s. I knew you would come back when he was gone.”

“Lady Morton, I ought to let you greet the rest of your guests or they will be queueing out onto the street.” Catherine laughed. “And when you have time of it, come and find me so that I might properly introduce you to my Aunt Celia.”

“I should like that very much. Do go on into the drawing room and find yourself a seat and some refreshments. Do not get embroiled in a bridge game just yet, for I shall come to find you sooner rather than later.” Lady Morton, fortified by giving a few polite instructions, quickly pulled herself together. “Oh yes, and Thomas is already in there. I thought you might like to know.” She smiled sweetly.

“Thank you, Lady Morton.” Catherine squeezed her hand and then took her aunt’s arm and led her into the drawing room that was so wonderfully familiar.

“What a lovely drawing room,” Celia said in hushed tones as they made their way through to an unoccupied couch.

“Yes, I have always liked it here. This house has a wonderful atmosphere.”

“I do like Lady Morton already,” Celia said with a smile. “Oh look, here comes a maid.”

“Would you like some tea, Lady Catherine?” the woman said and turned to smile at Celia also. “And Mrs Topwell?”

“Yes please, Daisy,” Catherine said warmly. “And how nice it is to see you again,” she went on, grateful that the maid had included her aunt.

“Thank you, My Lady. We were all very pleased to know that you were home.” She gave a little curtsy before she disappeared to arrange their tea.

“Goodness me, Lady Morton *is* attentive. Imagine her maid already knowing my name!” Celia looked mightily impressed. “And I quite forget that you are *Lady* Catherine.” She chuckled.

“You also forget that you are *Lady* Celia,” Catherine reminded her of

the title she had never used since leaving Barford Hall. “Although I do not think it is important to either one of us, is it?”

“No, I do not think so. And you are right; it has been many years since I thought of myself as Lady Celia. I think I prefer Mrs Topwell.”

“I think Mrs Topwell suits you very well indeed.”

“Good afternoon, Catherine. Am I interrupting?” Catherine looked up to see Thomas, handsome in brown breaches and an olive-green tailcoat, smiling broadly.

In her haste to have her aunt seated and comfortable, she had almost forgotten that Lady Morton said that Thomas was already in the drawing room and had not looked for him at all.

“Not at all.” Catherine smiled although there was a part of her that wished he were not there at all that day. “Please allow me to introduce you to my aunt, Mrs Celia Topwell.”

“It is very nice to make your acquaintance at last, Mrs Topwell,” Thomas said and bowed. “Catherine has already told me much about you and her time in Derbyshire.”

“It is very nice to meet you, Lord Carlton.” She smiled at him.

“May I join you?” he said and looked from Catherine to Celia and back again.

“Of course you may, young man,” Celia said, and Catherine could see just how delighted her aunt was.

No doubt she wanted to question him thoroughly, and a little like Philip, nursed a secret hope that the two fated lovers would one day be married and happy. “Tell me, do you play bridge?”

“I struggle my way through.” He laughed. “I am better as an opponent because I am easily beaten. As a partner, I believe I am a little infuriating.”

“It is true; his attention wanders, Mrs Topwell.” Lady Morton suddenly appeared and settled herself down on the couch next to Celia. “But if you like to play, perhaps you and I could be partnered? I am sure that we shall manage to gossip and win every hand. I can tell by instinct that you are a good player, my dear.”

“That sounds perfect,” Celia said brightly.

At that moment, Daisy returned with a tea tray set for two and laid it down on a low table between the couch and the armchair.

“I shall fetch another tray, My Lady,” Daisy said brightly.

“No matter, my dear,” Lady Morton replied and looked as if she had just thought of something. “Perhaps we could leave this tea tray here for Lady Catherine and Lord Thomas. Mrs Topwell and I are about to play cards, so perhaps you might bring us a little tray to one of the tables?”

“Certainly, My Lady.” Daisy smiled, curtsied, and disappeared once more.

“We can drink tea, gossip, *and* play bridge, my dear Mrs Topwell. What do you say?”

Catherine studied the two women and saw a little look of conspiracy between them. They were already in perfect harmony, and Catherine did not know whether to laugh or be frustrated by it.

“Lead the way, Lady Morton,” Celia said and sounded fully content as

she rose to her feet.

Thomas, who had risen to his feet whilst the ladies left, sat down again and grinned at Catherine.

“I must say, they are like two peas in a pod.” He laughed.

“Indeed they are.” Catherine shook her head a little. “I knew they would get along instantly.”

“I am only sorry that I did not have a few more moments with your aunt before Lady Morton took her away.”

“Yes, she is very good company. I am sure that you would get along with her very well.”

“Still, perhaps she might return to us. Perhaps our paths might cross again if I am lucky.” He smiled, and Catherine knew that he was hoping to cross paths with her more than her aunt.

It was a wonderful and terrible feeling at once, for she knew that nothing could change. He was set to be married, and his father’s feelings towards anyone from the Barford estate had undoubtedly remained as they were year upon year.

Catherine was sure that Thomas had deep feelings for her still, for he had made every attempt to be in her company from the moment she had returned from Derbyshire. And it was so hard to look into his beautiful pale blue eyes and deny him those few moments of happiness wherever he could get them, especially since his feelings, she knew from experience, were always so clear and pure.

But that would only make it harder in the end, not only for Catherine, but for Thomas also. It seemed that they were no better placed now than they had been all those years ago to be together. Whilst her own

father had gone, the Duke of Shawcross was hale and hearty and showed no signs of departing this mortal coil.

It was not that she wished another human being dead, of course, just that she was sure that *that* would be the only circumstance under which she and Thomas could ever be together again. And so it was, in the end, truly impossible.

“Thomas, I must speak to you,” Catherine said suddenly and felt her mouth go dry.

She really did not want to say it; she did not want to put him off his perpetual seeking out of her and that little hope in his eyes, the same hope she felt in her own heart. But one of them had to do it, and she could tell, she just knew, it would have to be her.

Chapter 23

“Oh, my dear Thomas, I had thought the two of you looked so very comfortable the other afternoon. I kept my eye on you as I played bridge, and you looked for all the world as you did all those years ago.” Lady Morton seemed almost as disappointed in the turn of events as Thomas.

“I thought the same, and if I am honest, I did not detect any malice in her words. She simply told me that we must be careful with our hearts and that she is not in any mood to have hers broken again. She was kind, but she was most decidedly firm,” Thomas said sadly and reached for his tea.

His conversation with Catherine at Lady Morton’s bridge afternoon had taken a decided turn very early on. After he had met with her in the woods on the edge of the Barford estate, Thomas had convinced himself that a certain coherence had been achieved between them, that they were not so greatly distant from the two young people they had once been.

When she had comforted him, held his hand, and walked arm in arm with him through the trees, it was as if nothing else in the world had existed for Thomas, not his life or his responsibilities, and certainly not his upcoming nuptials with Lady Eleanor Barchester.

But when she had told him that they had something they must discuss in that very drawing room where he now sat, Thomas had known that it would be something he did not want to hear.

“Thomas, I cannot tell you how wonderful it has been for me to see you again,” she began, and he knew that it was the calm before the storm. “But I can already sense a little closeness developing between us which I know I must avoid. I cannot tell you how it hurt to be

separated from you all those years ago, but I suppose you already know it very well yourself."

"It broke my heart, Catherine," he said and felt a deep sense of disappointment welling in the pit of his stomach.

"And it broke mine also. And as much as I would not want to feel that again, I would also not want you to feel it either. There is no path which leads to each other anymore, Thomas. There is no way for us to be together. I am a different woman now, and I have been through too much, so much that I would not under any circumstances put myself in harm's way again. I do not have the same spirit of adventure that I had as a young woman. Life has taught me much and taught me the hard way."

"But we can be friends, can we not?" he said and saw a brief flash of annoyance on her face.

It was so brief, so transient, that he could hardly believe now that he had seen it at all.

"We are nothing more than friends now, Thomas, and already I can see it leading to disaster for us both."

"But …"

"No, Thomas." She cut him off. "You are under the impression that it is as simple as picking up where we left off, and it quite clearly is not. Things are not the same, are they? For one thing, you are soon to be a married man, and I am sure that Lady Eleanor Barchester would not be at all pleased by the attention that you are paying me."

"But Catherine, please …"

"Thomas, I really do not know what it is you expect from me."

“I just want to be near you, Catherine. I never want to lose you again.”

“When you walk down the aisle in a few weeks’ time, Thomas, you will lose me forever, and it will be your choice. I have no part to play in this anymore. I have no father to placate and no husband-to-be waiting in the wings for me.”

“You are angry with me,” he said sullenly.

“I am angry that I find myself in this position again. I am angry that I have so easily walked back along the path to pain. That does not mean that I do not care for you Thomas because I do. But this is an impossible situation, and there is not a single thing that *I* can do about it.”

When Thomas had finished recounting the entire conversation to Lady Morton, he looked at her with his eyebrows raised and his heart full of expectation. However, Lady Morton did not speak for several minutes but simply stared at him a little incredulously.

“Lady Morton, for heaven’s sake say something,” Thomas said with an uneasy grin.

“Thomas, I cannot believe that you were first party to the conversation, then you have undoubtedly thought it through several times, and now you are recounting it to me, and yet you do not seem to have drawn any conclusion at all.” Lady Morton seemed to be a curious mixture of amused and annoyed.

“And now *you* are angry with me,” Thomas said and then laughed when he realized he sounded a little self-pitying.

“Thomas, I am going to ask you a question which Catherine already

asked you. What is it you expect of her?" Lady Morton put her empty teacup down on the table and leaned back heavily in her armchair.

"I love her; I love her the same as ever I did."

"You did not answer my question, but never mind for a moment." Lady Morton laced her fingers together across her lap and stared thoughtfully into the distance. "So, you love Catherine the same as ever you did?"

"I have never stopped loving her, and seeing her again has made me love her even more," Thomas said miserably.

"And do you love Lady Eleanor Barchester?"

"No, I do not."

"And do you love any other young lady?"

"No, of course I do not. There has never been anybody in my heart but Catherine," Thomas said and realized he spoke as if Lady Morton ought to have known that by instinct. "Forgive me; this business rather has me upside down at the moment."

"And I have no doubt it has Catherine upside down also," Lady Morton said gently. "But please believe me that I do not mean to antagonize you or say anything to cause you hurt, Thomas, because you are as important to me as Catherine herself is."

"You must speak freely, Lady Morton."

"You surely do not expect that you can marry Lady Eleanor Barchester and that Catherine will move back from Derbyshire for the simple pleasure of meeting you once a week by Stromlyn Lake, do you?"

“No, no I do not. Well, I did not really think about it.”

“And have you told Lady Eleanor Barchester that you will not be marrying her?”

“No, I had not thought of that. I do not see how I can escape it.”

“You escape it by saying no, my dear boy. Not only to Lady Eleanor, but to your father.”

“I am afraid it is my father who is the problem. He will be angry enough if I upend this little union between myself and Lady Eleanor and angrier still if he thinks the reason I have done so is for the sake of Catherine Ambrose. He will never agree to my marrying her.”

“You do not know until you ask.”

“I do know, Lady Morton. He would disown me in a heartbeat, and then I would have nothing with which to keep Catherine. She would be marrying a pauper.”

“And when you went to find her all those years ago in Derbyshire … when you spent all those miserable hours in Glossop asking strangers if they had ever heard of her, what had you intended?”

“I wanted to elope with her, to have her marry me.”

“And you would have had nothing, and been disowned, and been a pauper. That is my entire point, Thomas, and it is trying my patience a little that you cannot see it.”

“I cannot expect Catherine to live like that.”

“And you cannot expect her to suffer the pain of seeing you married to another and still manage to maintain some sort of meaningful

friendship with you. Imagine how you would feel if it were the other way around. Think back to your own fevered imaginings when you were peering out from the foliage at the graveyard hoping not to set eyes upon Catherine's husband. You really must try to see it from her side. If you cannot make the right decision, Thomas, you can only expect to have to let her go. It is not fair on her, you see."

"Then there is nothing to be done," he said and felt utterly defeated.

"There *is* something to be done, Thomas. You have a decision to make, and it must be made one way or the other. Whatever happens next is in your hands, Thomas, nobody else's.

Any move to be made is *your* move, not Catherine's, not your father's, not Lady Eleanor's. It is *your* choice, Thomas. Now, one way or the other, you must make it."

"You are right; I must make a choice."

Chapter 24

Catherine had felt a little steadier in the days since she had told Thomas precisely of her fears and feelings on the subject of their continued friendship. She did not want to cut him out of her life altogether, but she feared that if she did not, the pain would never cease.

At first, she had wanted to return immediately to Derbyshire, that would solve everything for her. That great distance would be put between her and Thomas again, and she could pretend that she had no choice in the matter just as things had been for so long.

But Celia had managed to talk her out of it, calmly telling her that she must concentrate on her returning relationship with her brother Philip for a while, that she must find some way to have the strength and the stomach to visit him without fearing the sight of Thomas, or even news of him.

Catherine knew that she must do just as Celia said, or she would never forgive herself. She had already lost Thomas a long time ago. This was nothing new, nothing that could ever be solved.

But she had been given a second chance to have a wonderful brother, and she knew she must not waste it. Philip was so precious to her and was now one of only four other people who knew that Henry was her child. And not only did he know it, but he was pleased to have a secret nephew, even if that nephew did not know it himself.

Catherine had already seen him playing with the child, taking him fishing and standing at the foot of the taller trees, urging him to climb higher and higher despite Catherine's protestations.

She had seen the light of love in her brother's eyes, and not only that,

but absolute unconditional acceptance of Henry's place in the world. And Henry had taken to Philip as a duck takes to water; how could she possibly separate them for great lengths of time in the future?

And so she concentrated on that for a few days, enjoying being at Barford Hall for once in her life, and trying not to think too hard about the future. It had given her a certain calm and so, some days later when her brother handed her a sealed letter in handwriting she recognized as if it were her own, she was surprised to find how instantly affected she was by it.

"You have a letter, Catherine," Philip said after breakfast, handing it to her in private. "From Thomas, I think." He whispered the last and smiled, and Catherine could not help laughing at his curiously hopeless romanticism.

"Thank you," she said and quickly opened it. "No, Philip, you need not leave. I have no secrets to keep anymore." She smiled at him before turning her attention to the letter in her hand.

"My darling Catherine,

Ever since our conversation in Lady Morton's drawing room, I have been unable to think of anything but you. I understand entirely why you said what you said, and I certainly cannot blame you for one moment for saying it.

I needed to understand what I was not seeing, and now I think I do. But I must speak to you, Catherine. I have something that I must say to you, and I would beg that you would hear it. I know you did not want particularly to see me again for a while, but I must ask you to reconsider that on this occasion.

If you are agreeable, I will be waiting at the old place this afternoon at midday. I am in hopes of seeing you there.

All my love,

Thomas."

When Catherine finished reading it, she folded it and sighed deeply. Philip shuffled a little awkwardly as if he ought not to have been there at all, not even to witness her reading the thing.

"He wants to meet me this afternoon at Stromlyn Lake," she said, knowing that was exactly what he had meant by the *old place*.

"Does he say why?" Philip asked cautiously.

"He just says that he has something that he wishes to say to me, that is all."

"And will you go?"

"I do not think it is wise, Philip." Catherine shook her head gently. "I could not have been clearer with him the other day, Philip. And I cannot see how continuing to meet will help either one of us. It is just too painful."

"And yet it seems as if he has something to say," Philip said and seemed a little overenthusiastic.

"It is very sweet of you to want such wonderful things for me, Philip. But the last eight years have taught me not to expect such romance in my life again. I really must protect myself."

"But Catherine, why can you not tell him about Henry? Does he not at least have a right to know that he is a father?"

"You are right; he does have a very real right to know that he is a

father, Philip. But I cannot do it. I cannot look into his eyes and wonder if he has chosen me out of a sense of duty. If I told him, it would be my way of asking him to abandon everything, would it not? It would even be an expectation, and I do not want my life to be based on such shaky ground."

"I understand, really I do. But if you leave it and leave it, if he marries that dreadful Lady Eleanor, it matters not when you tell him for there will be nothing he can do about it. You see, you are taking his choice away in this, even though I understand entirely why you would do it. Catherine, I wish I could offer advice so sensible that it could only help, but this is a most unusual set of circumstances, and I can only tell you to go with your heart." He smiled at her mischievously. "But if it was me, I know I would tell him."

"If it was you?" Catherine laughed heartily. "If you were a woman of eight and twenty with a child and had no husband, really, Philip." She laughed all the harder.

"Stop being silly." Philip reached out and gently pinched her arm.

Catherine squealed dramatically and reached out to pinch him in return, only he ducked out of her way, and she was forced to chase him through the great entrance hall and down the long corridor towards the drawing room.

"So, this is what you were like when you were children!" Aunt Celia said, appearing suddenly in the drawing room doorway.

"Sorry, Aunt Celia," Philip said and looked suddenly like a giant boy.

"What are the two of you quarreling about?" Celia was clearly highly amused and very touched to see a brother and sister who still got on so well in adulthood.

“I have had a letter from Thomas asking me to meet him. He says he has something to say to me. Philip thinks I should go, and I do not.”

“I think you should go too,” Celia said.

“Five minutes we have been here and already you are on Philip’s side in everything.” Catherine laughed and felt a sudden warm glow.

She felt as if she were a part of a real family again, more than she had ever felt when she and Philip had been there alone with their father.

It gave her such a sense of well-being she decided that she would, after all, meet with Thomas. If she had a family such as hers to go back to, she could be comforted and protected by them if need be. And she knew if she did not go, she would always wonder.

And so it was, just an hour later, that she set off on foot in the direction of Stromlyn Lake.

She had not walked that way since she had returned to Hertfordshire, not wanting to feel the great swell of emotion that would undoubtedly waylay her when she saw the place that had once meant so much to them both.

The day was sunny, although not terribly warm, and she was glad that she had picked up a light woollen shawl on her way out of Barford Hall.

As she walked along the familiar pathway, she felt a little twinge of the old excitement that she used to feel in the days when she had met him there quite secretly. She could not have imagined then striding purposefully out of her father’s house having announced to all where she was going and who she was meeting. How much had changed, and how much of it was for the better, in the Ambrose household, at any rate.

When she reached the high point of land that surrounded the recessed lake, she peered over the edge and down into the glassy water. She could see Thomas already there, sitting on a large dry rock and throwing little stones into the lake.

As soon as she began to make her descent, Thomas saw her and rose to his feet. He stood for a moment where he was, and then suddenly hastened to meet her, taking both her hands in his the moment they were face-to-face.

“I had to see you, Catherine. I have to tell you something that I did not want to put in a letter. Will you listen?” he said with his pale, sky blue eyes fixing hers in a way that made her want to fall into his arms.

She simply nodded.

“Catherine, I love you as much as I ever did. Not a day has gone by when I have not thought of you, and my love for you has not waned one ounce in all the years we were parted. I have never loved anybody else, and I never will love anybody else. I want you and you only, so will you have me? Will you consent to be my wife?” He paused for a moment, and Catherine stood staring at him, her eyes wide and her heart pounding. “It is true that I will have very little to offer you, for I will undoubtedly be disowned. But you know the pain of that situation yourself, and you know how it can be overcome. What do you say? Can we just get back to where we were?”

“Yes, yes, yes!” she said and threw her arms around his neck, feeling his strong hands on her waist lifting her from the ground and spinning her around until she was so disorientated that she had to protest and have him put her back on her feet again.

“I love you, Catherine,” he said and cupped her face in his hands.

“I love you, Thomas. It was always you; it has only ever been you.”

When he leaned in to kiss her, the years rolled back as easily as a rug. It was the most wonderful moment and one that she had never imagined would happen to her again.

Chapter 25

“So, we shall make a very merry little party at the ball, shall we not?” Eleanor Barchester said with forced brightness as the four of them sat down to afternoon tea in the drawing room at Winsford Hall.

Thomas could not bear Winsford Hall with its ostentation and the ever-present threat of the décor changing in a heartbeat to be in line with the current mode of doing things.

The drawing room was testament to the owner’s deep concern with appearances and opinions. The walls had recently been re-panelled in the darkest oak to almost three-quarters of the room’s height. The plain walls above were painted in a rich red, the colour of blood. The fabric of the armchairs and couches was either red or a rich golden yellow, and many of the large and plentiful portraits of the previous Earls of Winsford were framed in gold.

There seemed to be far too much going on for Thomas’ liking, and he always had the feeling he could not settle when he was a guest there.

Of course, he knew it was very likely the company he was in which unsettled him, rather than the determinedly up-to-date décor.

The Earl of Winsford was a source of constant irritation. He was a sycophant like so many other men who had hovered around the Duke of Shawcross over the years. If he was honest, there were many who had tried to occupy the space around him too in the years since Pearce had died. He could see how they might think that to align themselves with the future Duke was as important, if not more important, than aligning themselves with the current Duke.

But Thomas had rudely rejected any attempts, very likely swatting away genuine offers of friendship along the way. Not that he cared

particularly.

“I think we shall all travel together,” the Duke said, and Thomas marvelled at the way his father made what should have been a pleasant offer sound more like an order. “We shall collect you here in my carriage an hour before. That should give us plenty of time to get there.”

“Quite so, Your Grace.” The Earl inclined his head so far that Thomas almost laughed.

He thought that the Earl must spend a whole day with a sore neck after even the briefest of encounters with the Duke.

“How nice that we shall arrive together for a change,” Eleanor said directly to Thomas. “It makes a statement to the county, I feel.”

“Does it?” Thomas knew he was being obtuse.

He also knew this obtuseness was a means of putting off the need for a more forthright and honest conversation with Eleanor. Not only Eleanor but his own father.

As for the Earl, he was of little matter to Thomas, and he could not imagine that would change. Eleanor would no doubt be the bearer of bad news as far as her father was concerned.

But first, Thomas would have to get it all said. It had been some days since he had seen Catherine down by Stromlyn Lake.

He had been so filled with joy when Catherine had agreed to marry him that he had quite forgotten that there would be more to it. Thomas knew, of course, that he could not marry Catherine without ever mentioning a word about it, but he had been riding high on a wave of euphoria and had been able to push what was to come to the

back of his mind.

But the ball at the home of the Earl and Countess of Hargrave was the following evening, and he knew that Catherine and her brother would be in attendance.

He had not specifically stated when he would give his father the news, and knowing Catherine as he did, he did not think she would have expected him to ride straight home from Stromlyn Lake and deal with it all. Still, he would have to make his mind up to some course of action and do what he could to have a few minutes in private with Catherine at the ball and let her know his plan.

He smiled to himself, thinking that trying to secure a few moments with her right under his father's nose would be like old times.

Suddenly, he was hit with the old excitement, just as it had been all those years ago when he first began to take notice of her.

That first little meeting when he had followed her out into the corridor at Lord Vinton's ball remained one of the most thrilling events of his life. It had begun as a bit of mischief, something to amuse himself with at a ball where two of the most powerful men in the county were eyeing each other and puffing out their chests.

He had wanted to secretly thumb his nose at them both, and what better way to achieve it than sneak away and talk to the daughter of his father's enemy?

But as soon as he had spoken to her, as soon as she had answered him with a confidence equal to his own, Thomas had been lost. He was done for, and he knew that he had wandered idly into a moment that would change his life forever.

He had studied her before, but never at such close quarters, and it was

not until that day that Thomas realized he had never set eyes on a more beautiful woman in his life. Those almond shaped hazel eyes had met his squarely, and he had never known a day thereafter when he had not imagined them as clearly as he had seen them on that day.

“It brings us closer to our all-important announcement!” Eleanor barked and brought him thundering back into the present moment.

“I beg your pardon?” Thomas said quietly as he racked his brain for the thread of the original conversation.

“For God’s sake, boy! Where is your head today?” His father’s near-shout made all present jump in their seats, Thomas included.

So, his father was going to speak to him as if he were still a child, was he? For a moment, anger and outrage almost caused Thomas to blurt out the news that he was going to marry Catherine Ambrose just like that. No build up to the thing; no warning at all.

But to do so would be to shock Eleanor Barchester in front of an audience and, as much as he did not care for her, Thomas would never have done such a thing.

“My daughter was simply referring to the announcement that the whole county has been waiting for,” the Earl began tentatively, reminding Thomas of a dog who expected to be struck by its master at any moment. “Your forthcoming engagement.” His smile was more a terrified baring of teeth, and it made Thomas despise him all the more.

What sort of man would happily release his daughter into the custody of a bully like the Duke of Shawcross? Still, Eleanor Barchester was more than capable of looking after herself, being much more openly self-serving than her father.

“I see,” Thomas said and gave a brittle smile he hoped would satisfy them all.

“Perhaps that would be a good time to make our announcement,” Eleanor went on, and he could see by her cool demeanour that she was not the least bit affected by the tense atmosphere that hung in the room like an impenetrable cobweb. “The ball, I mean. Most of the county will be there. Anyone of any importance, anyway,” she spoke airily, and Thomas wondered what standard Eleanor Barchester set for a person’s importance in the world.

More than likely it was nothing more than money, title, and power. For what else was there in the world when you were Eleanor Barchester? Loyalty, humour, wit, these would undoubtedly be things of little or no value to her.

But to Catherine Ambrose, they were everything. Thomas could not remember a single instance of Catherine showing any sign of a materialistic nature, nor had he ever noticed false pride in her title. And all that he was in life was everything she accepted without the desire to tweak his qualities to suit her own mood. She laughed at his humorous observations; she was interested in his conversation. Catherine was so like himself in all the important things that he could not remember a time he ever felt awkward or cautious in her presence.

Never had he had to pretend to be anything other than himself. He had never had to assume an air of arrogance or pretend he was a hero or a sportsman. Catherine could not care less if he was an accurate shot at archery or if he was at the front of the pack in the hunt. These things were unimportant; unimpressive. Catherine dealt in the soul, and why would she not? She had the finest of souls, and that was why Thomas had never been able to shake her from his mind.

“So, is that agreed?” Eleanor was showing signs of exasperation. “We

shall announce our engagement publicly at the ball?"

"I thought we were engaged already," Thomas said quizzically as his mind raced with all manner of awful outcomes.

He had just proposed to Catherine, for heaven's sake. He could not allow the Duke, the Earl, and Lady Eleanor Barchester to upend that with their determination to have an engagement announced that would never come to fruition.

"Yes, but we have not made it public properly." Her brow was furrowed deeply and unattractively.

"Perhaps it would be inappropriate," Thomas began hastily in his desperation to head off such a thing. "It would be bad form to make Lord Hargrave's ball a celebration of our own. We ought to announce it at a ball at Shawcross. That would be a better way of doing things. The ball would be for that purpose, and all present would likely know it in advance."

"Yes, perhaps that would be best. It would be more fitting for it to be announced at a ball in our honour rather than elsewhere." Eleanor seemed pleased by the idea, or at least she was placated by it. "Yes, that would do very well indeed." She always spoke as if the world and everyone in it had one purpose only; to please her.

Thomas could feel things getting away from him. Instead of extricating himself from this evil engagement, he was entrenching himself deeper into it. But he had to say something; he couldn't allow them to announce the thing in front of Catherine, even if she did know that he would never go through with it.

"So, no announcements at the Hargrave ball," Thomas said and was determined to set the seal on that much at least.

He was beginning to feel he had let things drift for too many days. He ought really to have announced his decision not to marry Eleanor as soon as he had returned from Stromlyn Lake on that most wonderful of days.

It was all very well to have sailed along on a cloud of joy, but not very practical. There would be a lifetime of joy ahead of him married to Catherine, and he did not really need to indulge himself now.

Of course, the thought that he would be immediately disinherited had given him pause for thought and made him a little reticent to have the conversation he knew he must have. For one thing, he would need to arrange so much in advance. He would have to see what little money he did have to his own name and make sure it was untouchable before he made a move of any kind.

And, of course, he would have to find them somewhere to live. They had not even discussed this matter, and he did not know if they would be staying in Hertfordshire or if she would insist on going back to Derbyshire.

So far, Catherine had not seemed as if she would settle back in Hertfordshire. She had already told him how she had come to love Derbyshire, not to mention the aunt and uncle she had grown so attached to. There was even the young ward, Henry. Catherine had acted as his governess and would undoubtedly miss him too.

Perhaps he should have been a little more practical in his approach at Stromlyn Lake, but he had been so overcome with the old feelings of love and excitement that practicality could go hang itself. All he could focus on was her beautiful face, her almond-shaped eyes, and the full and rosy lips he had spent much of the remainder of that afternoon kissing.

“So, we must set a date for this ball.” Eleanor’s clipped tones disrupted

him from happier thoughts and annoyed him immensely.

“Indeed,” Thomas said flatly.

“I think it should be sooner rather than later,” Eleanor went on.

“Quite so, my dear,” her father chimed in.

“Let us say four weeks from Saturday,” the Duke added, his tone less blustering and hectoring than it had been.

Once again, Thomas could feel the world moving on too fast, the wheels set in motion for things that seemed out of his control.

“That would give us time to make all the arrangements,” Eleanor said, and her voice dripped self-satisfaction.

“What arrangements?” Thomas looked at her fully for the first time that day.

He had never really paid her much heed; he knew that. And she had a certain obvious beauty, that much was true. But he had never realized quite how angular her features were when she was scheming. And she was most certainly scheming now; working everything out to her own best advantage.

“I shall need four weeks to have my gown made for a start,” she went on.

“Wedding gown?” Thomas said and was as perplexed as he sounded.

“No, silly. My gown for the ball. I cannot have my engagement announced in an old gown.”

“But are *any* of your gowns actually old, Eleanor?” Thomas wanted to

be anywhere on earth but the drawing room at Winsford Hall talking about Eleanor Barchester's wardrobe.

"I am to be announced to the county as a Duchess in waiting, Thomas. I am sure that you would not have me dressed in anything but the very finest. And I am sure His Grace would agree." She gave the old Duke a wheedling look that turned Thomas' stomach. "I should not like to let the Duchy down after all."

"I am sure you will do no such thing, my dear," the Duke spoke with uncharacteristic gentleness. "But you must have the best to feel your best. Is that not right, Thomas?" The Duke gave him a secret look.

It was the sort of look that could blister paint, and Thomas knew better than to argue a ridiculous point any further than he had done already.

"Of course." He smiled at Eleanor and, at that moment, thought how much he despised her.

Chapter 26

“Did he settle?” Catherine said anxiously as Charles came into the room. “Perhaps I should go up to him.”

“Settle yourself down, lass,” Charles Topwell said with a warm laugh. “Henry is not ailing at all. He just wanted a long-winded story from his Uncle Charles, that’s all.”

“Oh, he is a menace when he wants something. I truly thought he had a pain in his stomach.” Catherine sighed. “I wonder if he is missing home.”

And Catherine wondered if she was not, perhaps, missing home also. Hertfordshire still felt flat to her, although, since her excursion to Stromlyn Lake, it no longer seemed featureless. Perhaps it was Barford Hall itself, with its old memories, that did not feel like home. Perhaps it had nothing to do with Hertfordshire itself.

At least she would never have to live at Shawcross Hall, even when she and Thomas were married. Where he saw his inevitable disinheritance as a problem, Catherine could see only its advantages. She would not bury one tyrant only to be forced to live with another.

“He is perfectly alright, Catherine. As soon as I told him a story, he settled down and is now sleeping like a baby.” Charles laughed. “And he is enjoying himself very well here with all the fishing and so many trees.”

“Yes, he told me himself that he adores Barford,” Philip added. “And he has a list of the trees he means to climb before he returns home; he has shown it to me.”

Catherine smiled. Philip was already greatly attached to his nephew,

and it was clear to her that he did not really want any of them to leave him alone at Barford Hall.

For all the wonders of reunions, there seemed to be new issues arising; issues which would need to be solved sooner rather than later.

“He is very happy here, Philip,” Catherine said reassuringly.

“And have you thought where you might live when you are married?” Philip went on.

“Well, no. We really did not have time to discuss a great deal.” Catherine laughed. “And I do not think Thomas had thought of anything at all before asking me to marry him. I think his main concern was the idea of my refusal.”

“Oh, the dear boy,” Celia said without looking up from her needlepoint. “How wonderfully romantic. Really, to have you meet him at a place that was so dear to you both so that he could propose to you.” She trailed off dreamily. “A woman dreams of such romance.”

“I am sure I was most romantic in my own proposal to you, my dear,” Charles interjected and Celia, choosing not to answer, just laughed rather loudly.

“Is it certain that he will be disinherited?” Philip asked cautiously.

“I think so. Or Thomas seemed certain of it at least,” Catherine said thoughtfully as she peered over to look at Celia’s needlework. “That is lovely, Celia.”

“Thank you.” Celia looked up and beamed. “It is for framing and hanging in Henry’s room. When it is finished, I am hoping it will resemble the tree back at Ivy Manor. The one Henry climbs, that is.”

“Yes, I can already see that it is.” Catherine peered closer still.

She felt a little emotional when she thought of just how loved her dear little boy was, how much everybody treasured him.

“Oh, good.” Celia continued to work. “Perhaps there is a chance that the old Duke will see a bit of sense at last.”

“Sense?” Catherine said.

“Yes, for if he disinherits Thomas, then he has no direct heir. Surely he would not be so embittered as to do such a thing.”

“I think he would, Aunt Celia.” Catherine shuddered. “And in any case, I should not want to live at Shawcross Hall. It was no happier a childhood home for Pearce and Thomas as this house was for us.” She looked over to Philip who nodded his understanding. “I would rather live somewhere very simple than live with Penrose Carlton. His poor character was as much to blame for my exile as father’s. If either one of them had been a better man … but they were not.” Catherine sighed. “Still, what’s done is done, and there is no use in looking over one’s shoulder and back into the past forever. The future must take over.”

“Quite right, my dear,” Charles said. “And there will always be a home for you in Derbyshire. The more, the merrier, eh?” He laughed, and Catherine could have kissed him.

Charles Topwell was a man of few words, but they were always extraordinarily well chosen. And genuine too, for she knew he would welcome Thomas Carlton into Ivy Manner without a second thought.

“And here at Barford too,” Philip added. “Although I would not like to make Thomas feel uncomfortable.”

“The main thing is that you shall not be homeless when you are married. If the Duke is so foolish and careless with his own flesh and blood, you will survive it.” Celia, who was holding two pieces of coloured thread between her teeth as she tied off two others on the hoop, summed the whole thing up nicely if a little incoherently.

“Thank you, one and all.” Catherine smiled, feeling every bit as cherished as her son was.

“So, what is to happen and when?” Philip said brightly. “I mean, there will be a wedding to organize. I daresay Aunt Celia will be more helpful to you than I, but I would be glad to hold any celebration you would wish for here.”

“That is so very kind, Philip. I had not even thought of the wedding itself. I suppose I am not as excited about it as I ought to be. I suppose I am looking forward to marriage rather than a wedding.”

“But why?” Philip rose to pour them all a glass of sherry, no doubt judging that Henry would be fast asleep and not around to present himself in the drawing room again as he had done earlier.

“I suppose there is so much that is uncertain. And of course, I already have Henry.” She spoke quietly but without shame; she would never, ever feel ashamed about Henry. “And I am not such a part of society here in Hertfordshire anymore. I would not want anything grand. In truth, I would prefer a very simple wedding with just family and closest of friends. Like Agnes Price.” She turned to look at Celia.

“Yes, Agnes would be very pleased.”

“And what about Henry?” Philip sounded incredibly cautious. “What are you to say to him? Have you decided when you will tell him you are his mother and Thomas is his father?”

“I have yet to tell Thomas,” she said and felt the weight of the heavy silence all around her. “As I have said before, I do not want Thomas Carlton to marry me out of a sense of duty. I would never trust his feelings for me, and it would do Henry no good either. We have managed this far, and I must put Henry’s welfare and happiness first and foremost.”

“But Thomas has asked you to marry him, my dear. You already can be sure of his true feelings for you,” Celia said and laid down her needlepoint. This was clearly a conversation she was going to give her full and undivided attention to. “Unless you think it would in some way put him off, and you are afraid to tell him?” She moved along the couch to sit closer by Catherine’s side.

“Goodness no, I have no fears of that nature.” Catherine laughed. “But I am cautious. I would like to have more than a simple meeting at Stromlyn Lake before I do or say anything that might affect Henry.”

“You have some doubts about the future?” Celia was always so gentle and tactful.

“I suppose my past has taught me to fear the future a little. I know it is likely nothing to worry about, but I would not expose Henry to anyone as Thomas’ son, nor even my own if it would have some deleterious effect on his life. I must think very carefully before I do such a thing.”

“But the moment Thomas lays eyes on Henry, he will be left in no doubt,” Philip said with a perplexed smile. “I am bound to say that I recognized Henry as Thomas’ child immediately, and I had not seen Thomas myself for many years. Surely Thomas will know it the moment the two are in company.”

“Philip, I do not mean to keep Henry a secret forever.” Catherine laughed again when she realized the misunderstanding. “I just mean

to wait until I have some firmer plan before me."

"Surely you do not doubt Thomas' intentions?" Celia said.

"I do not doubt his intentions, but I would not swear faithfully that I think they are not subject to change." Catherine sighed. "Thomas is a wonderful man, and I know that he loves me. I have always known it. But to throw away one's heritage and inheritance is not a simple thing. It is comforting to know that we have so many offers of a home." She smiled at them all in turn, wanting to impress her gratitude upon them. "But it is a difficult thing, I think, for a man to find himself unable to provide a home for his wife and family in his own right. I know Thomas is not a materialistic man, but he is still proud nonetheless, and I do not doubt this thought has crossed his mind."

"But Catherine …" Celia began.

"But nothing, my dear Celia." Charles' interruption was most uncharacteristic of him. "Forgive me, my adorable wife, but I think there is much of great sense in what our niece is saying."

"You are quite right, Charles," Celia said graciously. "And you are forgiven, in case that worries you at all."

"You are very kind." Charles bowed, much to Catherine and Philip's amusement. "Catherine, you must do as you see fit. Thomas has gone these eight years without any knowledge of his fatherhood, so a few more days or weeks will make no difference."

"Thank you," Catherine said and felt her throat tighten with emotion. "I would not like to expose Henry as an illegitimate child. I know you do not recognize the word in that sense, Uncle Charles, for you are a truly wonderful man. But the rest of society does not think as you do, and I think you rightly perceive that it is that sentiment I wish to

shield Henry from."

"And when you are married?" Philip handed round the full sherry glasses.

"Then things will be different." She smiled as she took the glass from him. "You know what society is, Philip. Once we are married, even if Thomas is disinherited, he will still be revered in this county as part of the Duchy. He will still be Lord Carlton, and so Henry will be accepted. I am sure there will be quiet pockets of gossip, but none who would dare say anything outright that would come to Henry's ears, nor hurt him in any way."

"That is the truth." Philip sighed with mock exasperation. "My goodness, but our class are fickle, are they not. They care so little for what is truly right. It must only have the appearance of being right, and that is all."

"Quite so." Catherine sipped her sherry. "But that is the way of things, and I have spent years carefully protecting Henry. Amongst other things, it is a habit which I shall find hard to break. I could not risk Henry hearing of it all from anyone but me. It is a sensitive issue and must be approached with the utmost care. I cannot tell you the times I have nearly told him and later broken my heart when I know I cannot, for his own sake."

"It must have been very difficult." Philip's handsome face was a picture of concern.

"At times. But I am bound to say that I have still been able to enjoy motherhood. I have had the wonderful privilege to be able to raise him myself, something I could never have done without Aunt Celia and Uncle Charles." She looked at them each in turn. "I have been blessed in more ways than I was cursed, and that is the truth. I have so much to be thankful for, and I include my son finally knowing his

Uncle Philip in all of that."

"Yes, I could not be more pleased." Philip looked very touched.

"I suppose much will come of Lord and Lady Hargrave's ball. I imagine I shall speak to Thomas then and have some firmer plans which will give me the little bit of confidence I need myself to move forward."

"Is the Duke going to be there? And will Thomas not already be disinherited by then?" Philip seemed boyish in his interest and excitement. "Lord, I cannot wait to see old Shawcross' face." He chuckled.

"Philip, behave," Celia said, and Catherine and Charles laughed.

"Well, he is as bad as our father was." Philip was still chuckling.

"I would think they would both be there. I mean, it would be too early for Thomas to be uninvited and very likely that the rest of the county would know nothing of all of this yet." Catherine pondered the whole thing. "And I cannot imagine the Duke staying away from an event in favour of his son. He is far too arrogant for that."

"But Thomas will be there regardless?" Celia had picked up her needlepoint again.

"Yes. He said he would speak to me there, and since both houses are invited it made sense. I cannot imagine he would not attend, even if his father turns his back on him there and then."

"Well, awkward or not, at least it will be done with, and you can start to live again, my dear," Charles said in an upbeat, jolly manner.

"Yes, Uncle Charles," Catherine said and suddenly felt a great wave of

nervousness overcome her.

She sipped her sherry determinedly as she wondered if she was really as confident of the circumstances as she was trying to appear. She had been thrilled and overcome to be proposed to by the man she loved, but it had not taken long for all her burning questions to come to the fore.

Catherine knew he loved her; there was no doubt in her mind. But could he really carry the whole thing through? She did not underestimate the effect that the last years would have had on him. Thomas had been moved into the position of heir years ago when his brother had died, and he had been subject to his father's constant scrutiny and opinions ever since and in a way that he had never been used to.

Catherine hoped, rather than believed, that the Duke of Shawcross had no hold over his son at all.

Chapter 27

Catherine had spent the larger part of the day of the ball preparing herself. She felt nervous suddenly as if she were still a young woman with a need to impress a potential suitor. Even though she knew that suitor to have loved her for many years, and even though he had already proposed marriage to her, still she needed to make the very best of her appearance that night.

“Goodness, you look beautiful, Catherine,” Celia said when she quietly let herself into Catherine’s bedchamber. “Your hair alone is very well worth the effort you have gone to. It is gleaming, and such wonderful thick curls.”

“Thank you, Aunt Celia. But Evelyn, one of my brother’s maids, did my hair for me. She really is very clever, and it is a shame that she is not a lady’s maid. She is wasted on dusting and polishing, truly.”

“Perhaps Philip will find himself a wife soon.” Celia smiled indulgently. “For he is such a handsome young man. I cannot think he will be left in peace all night with hopeful fathers chasing him this way and that.”

“Yes, I agree. But I think he avoids hopeful fathers wherever possible.” Catherine laughed. “Philip has a romantic heart, and he does little to hide it. I should be very surprised if Philip married for anything other than the deepest love. He would sooner marry a farmer’s daughter than a titled woman as long as he loved her.”

“I think you have both come up in this world with the most tremendous hearts, given that it was my brother who raised you. Perhaps because you kept friends and helped to make each other such fine people.”

“You must not be so kind that you make me cry. I am almost ready and cannot be all tear-stained at the last minute.” Catherine beamed, despite feeling the tug of emotion she always felt when she was the recipient of such warmth and kindness.

“Well, we cannot have that.” Celia reached out to touch the tiny paper flowers that the maid had fixed into Catherine’s soft brown hair. “Just lovely,” she said under her breath.

Catherine took a last look at her reflection in the mirror. She was wearing her finest gown in a green so pale it was almost ivory. It had short sleeves which puffed neatly at the shoulders and a modest neckline which did not dip quite as deep as was currently the fashion.

The satin sash at the empire line beneath the bust was narrow and dainty and in a deeper green than the material of the gown.

Catherine had worn a thick petticoat which pushed out the hem of the gown and made it dance a little around her feet. With her glossy brown hair curled beautifully and piled softly upon her head, she was most pleased with her appearance. She knew she was not absolutely up to the minute in terms of fashion, but she was classically well dressed and felt comfortable and confident.

“I daresay it is time to make our way down to the carriage. Charles and Philip are waiting, and Henry is finally sleeping peacefully,” Celia said in an attempt to gently coax her into action.

“Yes, of course. I cannot stand vainly looking at my reflection all night.” Catherine laughed.

“Well, it is not a luxury you allow yourself very often, is it? And I should say on this occasion that it is long awaited and well deserved.” Celia took her arm. “Come along.”

By the time they arrived at the sprawling mansion that was Hargrave Hall, the gravelled area in front was full of carriages and people and stable hands.

“Let us wait a while before getting out,” Philip said as he peered out of the window. “I know we would sail to the front of the queue, but I would rather not have to work my way through all those people. I find it all a little bit unsettling for my liking.” He laughed.

“Quite so, Philip. I for one am content to watch it all going on from here for a while,” Catherine said and did just that.

The Earl and Countess of Hargrave were very popular figures in society. Amongst the wealthiest in the county, every event they laid on was a lavish affair and very well attended. Hargrave Hall was sprawling and always decorated in the mode of the moment. They were a fashionable young couple, and an invitation to their home was a most desirable thing.

As was the custom of society when attending such a stylish affair, everybody present was so clearly trying to outdo everybody else. As Catherine peered out of the window of the carriage, she felt a stab of homesickness for Derbyshire.

Not that there were not some fine houses in that county, it was just that Ivy Manor and its inhabitants were just outside that world. Just enough outside to be respectable without having to endure the constant demands and pressures of a society such as the one she was currently witnessing.

There were some very finely dressed young ladies being helped down from carriages only to be rearranged by their mothers the moment their dainty feet touched the ground. There was so much undisguised primping and preening that Catherine almost laughed, thinking to herself that she might as well be studying a field full of peacocks.

“Does it not occur to them that they can be seen from the house and therefore by their hosts as they straighten and twirl and puff themselves up?” Philip said, and Catherine laughed loudly.

“I was thinking the very same thing, Philip. Perhaps they think they are invisible until they are inside.”

“I do not think I have seen so many feathers in all my life,” Charles said, and all present laughed.

Catherine peered out again and could, indeed, see a great many fine hairstyles sporting thick bands and long feathers. She wondered how the ladies wearing the largest of them had managed to travel in their carriages with any sort of dignity. It struck her that they would have to be bent almost double so that their feathers did not collide with the roof.

She reached out and touched the paper flowers that Evelyn, the maid, had put into her hair and was glad of them. They were just enough and no more.

As she continued to watch the melee of people slowly making their way to the great stone steps of Hargrave Hall, her heart leaped when she caught sight of Thomas. He climbed down from his father’s carriage and straightened the long tails of his black coat. He was also simply dressed, but immaculate and well-groomed, and Catherine could see the red hue of his hair in the light of so many lanterns which burned along the front of Hargrave Hall.

He looked so tall and handsome standing there that she could hardly believe that they were finally to be together at last. It seemed like a dream, a fairytale almost. How many times over the last eight years she had longed to do no more than set eyes upon his face once again and now, beyond all her dreams, she was to marry him.

They were to be together forever just as they had always wanted.

Catherine continued to watch with interest as Thomas leaned into the carriage and helped out a young woman. Once the young woman was down, another man climbed down, an older man. And then, finally, the Duke of Shawcross himself stepped out.

The occupants of her own carriage fell silent, and Catherine knew that they were all intent upon the same scene. She knew that they had all realized immediately, as she had, that the immaculate young blonde woman could only be Lady Eleanor Barchester, daughter of the Earl of Winsford.

Lady Eleanor, like many of the other young ladies present, immediately fell to rearranging her attire the moment she was down from the carriage. Her hair had been curled into immaculate ringlets, and there seemed to be not a strand out of place anywhere.

Over the top of her ringlets she wore not simply feathers, but an elaborate feather filled headdress which was already drawing glances from other young ladies that were a mixture of admiration and envy.

Her gown was very fine indeed and, as would be clear to everybody else, extraordinarily expensive. Although Catherine knew what it was to be the daughter of an earl, she could never have imagined having the confidence to carry off such an ostentatious and fashionable outfit.

The woman was some years younger at perhaps two and twenty, and she struck Catherine as being supremely confident. It was a different sort of confidence to the one that Catherine enjoyed, being more the confidence of appearances and contentment at having all eyes upon you.

That was a sort of confidence Catherine had never had and never

wanted. Even at almost eight and twenty, Catherine still would not be comfortable to be the centre of attention.

As the party of four turned to make their way to the front of the queue that was building, it was clear that the Duke of Shawcross was going to use his superior title to greatest advantage.

Catherine's mouth went dry as she watched Lady Eleanor lace her arm through Thomas' as they walked up the stone steps. They made a very handsome couple, and Catherine felt her heart plummet at speed, landing hard in the pit of her stomach and making her feel as if she had no air left in her at all.

So, Thomas had not yet mentioned the fact that he had proposed to another woman altogether.

"Catherine, all it means is that he has not yet found the right moment to say it." Celia, as perceptive as ever, had picked up on her feeling. "As we discussed ourselves, he has a good deal to think about. These things cannot happen overnight."

"To be honest, Aunt Celia, I really do not know what I *had* been expecting. I mean, I had thought that he and his father would be here, possibly even separately and very much at odds with one another. But I can honestly say that I had not imagined for a moment that I would have been witness to any closeness between Thomas and Lady Eleanor. I had imagined that he would have told her already, if not his father, but it appears that he has not. I did not think for a moment that she would be here at all."

"Just give him time, my dear," Celia stated sensibly. "And in any case, he no doubt has things to tell you this evening and will find a way of doing so. You must not be downhearted at this first hurdle."

"But this is not the first hurdle, is it? It is just another hurdle in a long

line of hurdles, and I find myself very tired." Catherine looked down at her dress and no longer felt comfortable and confident.

Rather, she felt old for her years, tired of life, dowdy, and outdated. More than anything, she wanted to beg her brother to have the driver turn the carriage around and speed them back to Barford Hall. She knew she could not do that; she knew she had to hold her head up for her family's sake.

While she knew that they would run their lives entirely to suit hers, Catherine was not the sort of young woman who would be pleased with such power. No, they would go to the ball as invited, and they would spend a convivial evening in one another's company.

And Catherine would do what she could to hide the fact that the feeling that was now welling within her was pure, unadulterated fury.

By the time they made their way inside Hargrave Hall, they were amongst the last to be greeted. Philip had kept them all in the carriage for an inordinate amount of time out of kindness to his sister. It was clear that he could see that she was upset, however much she tried to hide it, and he was doing what he could to lessen its effects.

As was custom, Philip took the lion's share of the conversation when they came to be greeted by Lord and Lady Hargrave. Catherine simply smiled and nodded throughout the whole thing, grateful not to be asked any questions about her lengthy absence from Hertfordshire.

As they made their way into the lavish ballroom, Philip took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. She turned her head to look up at him, and he quickly winked, just as he had always done when they were younger.

Catherine winked back at him, careful not to be observed by anybody else in such an unladylike occupation. But her brother had gone out of

his way to make her feel better, and she would acknowledge it, no matter what.

As much as she did not want to look in the direction of the Shawcross party, Catherine could not help herself. She surreptitiously watched as Lady Eleanor fussed about her fiancé like an elegant, fluttering little butterfly. And, as far as she could see, Thomas seemed content enough with the situation.

Still, he could hardly swat her away publicly, and Catherine knew that. But at that moment reason and sense were not making her feel any better.

She tried her best to make conversation with her family, and yet Catherine could not keep her attention on them for more than a minute. There was a part of her that wanted to look, wanted to see Thomas and Eleanor together as a means of hardening her heart finally.

At one point, Thomas looked over at her, and he began his secret smile, the one that he had used all those years ago, the one that they had *both* used to acknowledge one another privately. But before Catherine could make her mind up to smile back at him, Lady Eleanor Barchester reached for his hand to gain his complete attention.

And, having done so, the pristine young lady turned her head to stare at Catherine. It was clear in that one, long glance that Eleanor knew precisely who Catherine was. It was clear also that the almost imperceptible smirk on the young lady's face was designed to convey her triumph.

What an overdone, spiteful little creature Lady Eleanor was and how Catherine at that moment wished Thomas joy of her! If he was to be so weak-willed that he could not stand up to his father enough to even acknowledge her openly at the ball, how on earth was he ever going

to make the final break that he must surely make if the two of them were ever to be together?

As far as Catherine was concerned, it was all impossible. It was as impossible now as it had been back then, and she would waste no more of her time or her heart on Thomas Carlton.

Turning her back entirely on the Shawcross party, Catherine determined not to look Thomas' way again, that night or ever. With the stoicism that had served her well for eight years, Catherine engaged her family in conversation and pushed everything else from her mind.

How glad she was now that she had not told Thomas anything about Henry. Perhaps it had been a mother's instinct for protection, or perhaps it had been a woman's insight into the vagaries of men.

Either way, Henry was safe, and that was the main thing. And as for Thomas Carlton, well, he had made his choice as far as she was concerned, and what became of him now was none of her business.

Chapter 28

Thomas had paced up and down the edge of Stromlyn Lake for almost two hours before he finally gave into the idea that Catherine had chosen not to come. He knew at the ball that there was something wrong; he had felt it in his very soul.

When he had tried to smile secretly to Catherine, she had simply stared back at him without any expression on her face whatsoever. Of course, he knew it had not helped that Eleanor had sought to interfere at that moment by continually straightening his necktie and reaching for his hand.

It was clear to him that Eleanor was making her secret statement, her acknowledgement of Catherine's presence. And he knew that he ought to have done something about it, and he should have done it long before the ball.

He knew that he had convinced himself that all would be well, that Catherine would not yet have expected him to have made an announcement of any kind to his father, let alone Eleanor. He had assumed that after eight long years she would not mind waiting a little longer. But why should she? And why had he been so foolish as to drag his heels?

After all, when he had last met her at Stromlyn Lake and declared his love for her, Thomas had meant it with every fibre of his being. He had always loved Catherine and always would, and now it seemed very likely that he had, with his foolishness, lost her forever.

He had kept his note to her as brief as possible since he had wanted to say everything he had to say in person, just as he had before. He did not want to apologize on paper; he wanted to apologize face-to-face. Catherine deserved that much at least, and he thought it his only hope

of keeping them together.

When she had turned her back on him at the ball, Thomas had known her to be angry and upset. He felt dreadful, knowing it was all his fault and knowing that she had every right to feel that way. Even if he had proposed to her, what woman should have to put up with the sight of a man she had loved and waited for so long in the company of another? And certainly, a woman of Catherine's calibre should not have to put up with it; he should have realized that. He should have acted more quickly, been more forceful, taken back a little of his old personality.

And it was *that* personality that he knew Catherine had fallen in love with all those years ago. If he no longer had his spirit of adventure, his determination to speak his mind and be disagreeable in front of his own family, then what was left of him for her to love?

She would no more love him than she would have loved Pearce had she known him to be so different now.

When had he become this man? When had he lost his spirit of adventure and his determination to fly in the face of convention? What had happened to the young man who cared so little for the opinions of his overbearing family that he had sought out the daughter of his father's enemy, made it his business to befriend her?

For that man was certainly not at the ball the night before. That was a very different man altogether, a man who had allowed the weight of spurious responsibility to hold him down. Even though he had fully decided that he would accept his disinheritance for love, still he had acted in a way that had tended to protect his family's interest rather than Catherine's.

He had acted as the heir to the Duchy instead of the young man who had raced to Derbyshire and fruitlessly searched the county for his one

true love. Where had that man gone? What had become of him?

Thomas stopped his pacing and sat down on the grass at the side of the lake. He stared into the glassy water, at the beautiful, faithfully inverted reflection of the trees that surrounded it. He had hoped against hope that Catherine would come today, that she would meet him there in that place which had always been so very special to them both.

It was as if the lake had been the sole witness to their burgeoning love when they had been but twenty years old and so very full of excitement, adventure, and courage.

Could his courage really have gone forever? Or was it simply buried deep beneath the layers of guilt and duty that had overtaken his soul on the day his brother died? In his guilt, Thomas had simply become Pierce. Or at least he had been determined to take on his role and fulfill it to the best of his abilities, at any rate. Anything to assuage his dreadful guilt and honour his brother's memory.

But that had been before; that had been when he had thought he would never see Catherine again. Was this really what Pearce would have wanted now?

That sad young man who had tried for month upon month to atone for the pain he had caused, would he have wanted to see Thomas just follow in his footsteps, forever trying to please an old man who could not be pleased?

In the months before he died, Pierce had come to see through it all, even if Thomas would not acknowledge it. Pierce had come to realize that he would never gain his father's good approval, and Thomas was sure that, in the end, his brother had decided not even to seek it anymore. If he had lived, perhaps Pierce would have made a better job of all of this. He had changed so much and grown into his own

person, however short-lived that had been.

Thomas knew that he would have made a fine heir and an even better Duke had he lived because Pierce had learned from his own mistakes; he had changed. He would have found a way to tolerate their father without bowing to his every whim, and Thomas, staring hopelessly into the lake, realized that he had *not* done the same.

For all his pride in his individuality, intelligence, and wit as a young man, he had grown into a silent adult, a man who had been persuaded to take Lady Eleanor Barchester for a wife simply because she had good breeding and her father great wealth. He had become everything he had despised before, everything he had mocked Pierce for being.

On the night before the ball, he had displayed his new character most completely to the only woman he would ever love. Catherine was nobody's fool, nobody on the earth. He had never known anyone of sharper intellect and keener perceptions than Catherine Ambrose, and in that she had remained constant.

Catherine had suffered exile, complete estrangement from the brother she loved; she had been the one to pay the price. And yet she was still standing, still herself after all these years. She was still courageous where he now seemed to lack. And of all the people there in the ballroom, Catherine Ambrose would have been the only one to truly see it, to know it with certainty.

In his heart, Thomas knew that she would not come, not this time. She had given him a chance to prove himself, and he had failed her miserably.

It had been time for him to suffer disownment, to put his love before anything else, and he had failed utterly. He had known when he had penned his letter to her that morning that there was a very good chance that she would not come to him there at Stromlyn Lake.

“My Darling Catherine,

I fear things did not go quite as planned last night, and I am bound to apologize for all of it. But I should not like to apologize here on paper, but rather to see you in person so that I might do it properly. We still have much to discuss, and I should have liked to have had the opportunity to speak to you last night, but it did not present itself. I know you turned your back on me with purpose and do not blame you, but I would beg that you turn back towards me now and at least meet me today at Stromlyn Lake so that I might explain.

I shall make my way to the lake at midday and wait there in hopes of seeing you at some point thereafter. Please allow me this one opportunity to explain myself and make amends for what I know now was clearly very hurtful behaviour.

With all my love,

Thomas.”

He ran over the contents of his brief letter in his mind, feeling certain that he had explained enough in it to leave her with the distinct impression that, as far as he was concerned, his proposal to her still stood.

But perhaps it did not matter to her now if his proposal still stood. Perhaps Catherine Ambrose had seen enough of him at the ball, seen the changes in him that he was only realizing now himself. Perhaps she now thought him weak and vacillating, a shadow of his former self. Surely as she had looked upon him at the ball, pleasing his father and pleasing a young woman he had no intentions of marrying, she had seen nothing of the vibrant youth he had once been.

She would have looked at him and known him to be no different than

the rest, no better. All the clever ways and witty words of his youth seemed so far away now, and yet he knew it was all still there deep down inside him.

Thomas knew that the root of it all was the idea that he would be disinherited. The thing that Catherine had suffered with grace, he was silently railing against. It was true that he had never particularly wanted to be the Duke of Shawcross, and he knew that *that* had not changed. If only Pearce was still alive, ready to be the Duke of Shawcross himself, Thomas would have been overjoyed.

But that was never going to happen, and his father was never going to change. He could not imagine a single circumstance in which his father would give his blessing to any union between a Carlton and an Ambrose. He knew his father well enough to know that he would most certainly cut off his nose to spite his face and would gladly see the Duchy finally fall into the hands of distant heirs, relations he had either *never* seen, or not seen for years, than to forgo the pleasure of punishing his son for the crime of being his own man.

But should any of that stop Thomas being his own man? Could he go back to being his twenty-year-old self, the young man who would have given up everything for her?

It was no good wondering what might have been had he found her all those years ago, eloped with her and married her. And it did not matter anyway; what truly mattered was what happened now. When he compared the idea of losing his security to losing Catherine, only the idea of losing Catherine truly made him wretched.

And it would feel even worse than it had felt all those years ago to lose her, for then she had loved him. If he lost her again and lost her by his own foolishness, he would undoubtedly lose her love also, and that was the very thing that he could not bear to think about.

Thomas rose to his feet and brushed the dusty earth from his breeches and boots. He rose to his full height and stretched, staring up into the blue sky and squinting into the pale sun.

He did not have any more regard for his father now than he did all those years ago; what on earth did he have to lose? For him to continue as he was doing would be to act as Pearce had done, and for what? If his brother's death had not changed the Duke, surely nothing could.

Thomas knew that he had to reclaim his own soul, for it was the only way to hold onto Catherine's heart. He could not be the man that she had seen the night before at the ball, or she would be lost to him forever. He could only be who he truly was deep down, the adventurous, courageous, confident Thomas Carlton of eight years ago.

No more letters, no more secret smiles across crowded ballrooms. Thomas was going to go right to her; he was going to untether his horse and ride him all the way to Barford Hall. He would ride right up to the front door and jump down from his horse with the old confidence.

Whether he was welcome or not, Thomas was going to show her just how much he loved her. And he was going to show her just how worthy he would be of her love. He would be the man that she remembered, the man with the self-same character she had known him to have all the years they had been apart.

Thomas took his horse's reins and led him up the steep incline, scrambling all the way and wondering how his beloved Catherine, now so used to the hills and peaks of Derbyshire, might easily overtake him in the circumstances. And the man that he was, the man he had always been, would love the idea.

All he had to do now was to find her, not to beg for forgiveness or try to persuade her but show her that he was the man he had always been. They were meant to be together, and he did not care where they ended up living, it mattered not.

He loved Catherine with all his heart and, as he finally climbed up onto his horse's back and heeled him away, he was absolutely determined to have her.

Chapter 29

“I am sure if you take one of the horses and ride out there now, he will still be there,” Celia said and not for the first time.

“Aunt Celia, I know you want the best for me, but I cannot ride out to Stromlyn Lake, not this time. I will not meet him in secret anymore. I will not do it.”

“But there is nothing to say that he would wish to meet you in secret forever. Perhaps a little secrecy is just necessary now as you work it all out between you.”

“After eight years, Aunt Celia, and a very great deal of heartbreak, I am not inclined to fall in with the plans of anybody. I make no secret of the fact that I love Thomas and have done for so long. But I have managed without him all these years, and I will continue to manage without him. I will not share secret glances in the hopes that his father might be kept in the dark; I will not *be* a secret. I am worth more than that; I know I am.”

“And I am sure that Thomas knows it too, my dear. I cannot help thinking that he is in a very awkward situation at the moment, something which must be carefully negotiated.”

“But why? When he is as sure as I am that his father *will* disown him, what is to negotiate? Either he loves me and has the courage to announce it, or he does not. It is as simple as that, you see, no negotiation required.”

“When you say it like that, my dear, I cannot find an argument to counter. And yet I cannot help thinking that if you could climb over this last obstacle, it would be the last. You see, I have watched you these last years and seen everything your tender heart has gone

through. I cannot bear the idea that so much pain and torment has been in vain, to no purpose. Especially when you are so close to your happiness, Catherine."

Philip had quietly entered the drawing-room as Celia spoke and padded noiselessly across the thick ornamental rug to take a seat opposite his sister.

"You have determined not to meet him?" he said gently.

"Please tell me that I am not to disappoint you too, Philip," Catherine said feeling suddenly exhausted.

She knew that her brother and aunt wanted the very best for her, but she dearly wished that she could have followed her Uncle Charles and Henry and gone down to the lake to fish for a while. She did not enjoy the occupation, but she would have found Charles' company very easy on a day when her own spirits were so low.

And to spend the day with Henry would have reminded her just how much she did have in this life, so much so that she could live it all without the wonder or worry of marriage. If she had Henry, she had everything she would ever need.

Her aunt and uncle had allowed her so much, had helped her to keep the child with her that in any other circumstances would have been raised in an orphanage. She knew she would be grateful to them for the rest of her days and glad to spend her life in Derbyshire.

"Catherine, all I want is for you to be happy. I would not wish to pressure you into anything. But perhaps there is some sense in what Celia says."

"There is sense in what Celia says, Philip. But I am the person who has lived the last eight years, the person who cannot make the same

mistakes again." Philip looked crestfallen, and Catherine wished that she could say something that he wanted to hear.

Philip had a good heart, as did Celia, and she knew that both of them wanted to see a happy ending to all of this. They wanted to see a young family reunited, a child legitimized, and a woman returned to her rightful place.

What she could not tell Philip was that she almost wished she had never returned to Hertfordshire. As much as she loved and missed her brother, seeing Thomas again had made a life which she had simplified as best she could into something very much more complicated.

Catherine wanted more than anything to pack up their things, load the carriage, and return to Ivy Manor. She wanted to spend her mornings teaching her son everything he needed to know to progress in the world and her afternoons worrying as she watched him climb higher and higher in his favourite tree.

She wanted to go back to the High Peak and stay there forever, never to return and never once to hear how Thomas Carlton got along in his life. As far as she was concerned, he could marry the neat, spiteful little Eleanor Barchester, finally become the Duke of Shawcross, and have as hollow a life as it was possible to have. She would not concern herself with it anymore.

Thomas was not the man she had once known; she had seen that last night. When he had looked at her across the ballroom, she had seen a man who had lost his courage somewhere along the way. But what a thing if she had lost her courage, if she had not fought all this time. Her beloved child would be living in dire circumstances somewhere, and she would have run headfirst into the nearest suitor who would have her, purely and simply out of fear.

No, she had never wanted for courage. And since she had never wanted for courage, she would not stand to look at it in him.

“Oh look, here come Charles and Henry. I think they have brought a fish back with them.” Celia pulled a face. “Oh dear, I do hope we are not going to be expected to eat it.” She shuddered, and Catherine laughed.

That was what she wanted. She wanted normality, the same gentle flow of her life in Derbyshire. Perhaps, in her own way, Catherine also lacked in a little courage.

“Goodness me, they look as if they need a little assistance.” Philip had risen to his feet to peer out of the window and now turned to leave the drawing room. “I will just help them in with their things.”

“Well, it looks as if we have fish for dinner.” Celia sighed dramatically. “And Catherine, please forgive me for trying to steer you these last days. You have been through too much in your life to have somebody else tell you how to live it, and I hope you can see past my little transgression.”

“There is nothing to forgive, Aunt Celia. I have nothing to do in this world but thank you and Uncle Charles for everything, for you truly have given me *everything*. You had the courage and kindness to see me through the darkest times of my life, and I do not easily go against anything you would tell me.”

“Then let us say there is no pressure from either one of us and keep it there.” Celia smiled and seemed relieved that they were back on their old footing. “Unless I am to eat fish, then I shall make the most dreadful fuss.”

“Thank you,” Catherine said and was grateful for Celia’s gentle humour.

It had got her through once before, and it would get her through again.

“Goodness, I think you have a visitor.” Celia, who had not yet turned away from the window, peered across the room at Catherine with a disquieting look.

“Who is it?”

“At the moment, all I can see is a young man on horseback,” she said and turned her attention so closely to the window that Catherine was sure her aunt’s nose must surely be touching the glass. “He is coming at quite a speed down the driveway. I can see that certain redness in his hair, and although I cannot be certain, I am reasonably sure that it is your Thomas Carlton.”

“Is Henry inside? Has Philip moved them indoors?” Suddenly Catherine was on her feet, her heart pounding.

She hardly knew what was affecting her the most. Her heart lurched with the familiar excitement of old, and she rose to her feet to peer out of the window and watch Thomas on horseback cantering towards them. He looked disheveled and determined and, she had to admit, extraordinarily courageous.

She then looked around for any sign of Henry, for now was not the time for the two of them to meet. But she could see no sign of them and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Since Philip is busy, perhaps I ought to go out and see if the butler is attending to Lord Carlton,” Celia said and raised her eyebrows for approval.

“Thank you, Celia. Yes, if you would not mind.”

Without a word, Celia darted out of the room to intercept Catherine's visitor.

As she sat alone in the drawing room, Catherine did her best to keep a lid on her excitement. Thomas coming out all this way to see her when she had failed to arrive at Stromlyn Lake was certainly a wonderful, heartfelt gesture, but after her disappointment of the night before, Catherine had to be sure in her mind that a gesture was not enough. Not after everything that had happened.

Hearing footsteps approaching in the corridor, Catherine took a deep breath and turned to stare at the door into the drawing room. Celia appeared without the butler, bringing with her a most determined - looking Thomas.

"Here is Lord Carlton, my dear," Celia said with such a determined attempt at normality that Catherine almost laughed. "I shall just have a quick word with the butler and have tea sent up if you will excuse me for a moment." Celia gave her a look which suggested that she should not decline.

"Oh yes, of course," Catherine said and watched as Celia darted away. "Well, do come in, Thomas. My aunt is determined that you shall have tea, and so you shall." She registered her cold tone.

"I have not come here to fight with you." Thomas strode across the room and stood before her giving every appearance that he most certainly would not be content to take a seat and take tea only to be dismissed at the end of it.

"Have you not?"

"Catherine, I love you, and you know I do."

“I do not doubt your love, Thomas. That is *not* the thing I doubt.”

“But you doubt my courage; I can see it in your eyes,” he said, and his pale blue eyes fixed her. “But I am here to tell you that you are wrong. You did not see the best of me in these last weeks because I have not shown you the best of me. But you know the man I truly am, and I am here to tell you that I am not changed into something else. I am still me, and I mean to marry you.”

At that moment, the door to the drawing room opened, and Philip bustled in, giving every appearance that he had no idea that Catherine had company. And not only had he blundered in, but he was pulling young Henry in with him, holding his hand tightly.

Catherine’s mouth opened wide as she looked at Philip and, as she studied her brother’s face, she realized that this was *no* mistake. Philip had decided to take matters into his own hands and, had she not been suddenly so terrified, Catherine knew that she would have been utterly furious.

“Forgive me; I did not know you had company, Catherine.” Philip smiled brightly, but there was a flash of consternation in his eyes. He knew that he would be in a good deal of trouble later; that was certain. “Thomas, I hope you are well.” He bowed in Thomas’ direction. “Goodness, it is a good number of years since we have been in company, is it not?”

“Yes, I have not spoken to you since the night you so kindly arranged my final meeting with your sister.” Thomas spoke as if he were in a dream, simply answering a question by instinct rather than by design.

His eyes were fixed firmly on young Henry, and it was clear to Catherine that he knew exactly who he was looking at. This was not simply the ward of Charles and Celia Topwell; this was his son.

Henry stared back, unflinching in his curiosity, looking this new acquaintance up and down in the sort of bold manner that only a young boy could manage so successfully.

Catherine held her breath as Thomas took a few steps forward and stared intently at Henry. He slowly lowered himself to the floor, kneeling in front of Henry so that they were eye to eye.

Henry did not seem at all disturbed by the behaviour of a man who was, as far as Henry was concerned, a stranger.

Thomas leaned forward until his face was just an inch away from his son's and looked deeply into the eyes that were so like his own.

Henry tilted his head to one side quizzically but did not move away. He seemed to be peering with equal curiosity and, if possible for a boy so young, equal intensity.

Catherine could see the look of absolute knowing on Thomas' face, and she could almost feel his simultaneous joy and pain. She felt a wave of guilt, sadness that Thomas had missed the first seven years of his son's life, but she knew it was to no avail. There was nothing she could have done to change it. There was nothing either one of them could have done.

Thomas continued to kneel in silence and, finally, Catherine saw tears running unchecked down his handsome face. Her heart almost burst when she saw Henry reach out to touch Thomas' face, smearing his tears across his cheeks with a hand that still had the last vestiges of the chubbiness of infancy.

"Well, perhaps we shall leave you to it for a little while," Philip said, quietly interrupting the scene he had caused. "Henry has caught a fish, you see, and he is very keen for the cook to show him exactly what happens next. Revolting, but informative." He smiled cautiously.

“Well, if you will excuse us,” he said and looked at Catherine significantly before turning and leading Henry from the room.

Henry stopped when they reached the door and looked back at Thomas, who was still on his knees and staring after him, seeming as if he could not take his eyes from the child.

“When we you going to tell me?” Thomas said when Henry disappeared.

He rose slowly to his feet and stood staring at the empty doorway for some moments before he turned around and stared right into Catherine’s eyes.

He walked slowly across the room, dropping down into the armchair opposite hers, never once releasing her from a piercing, almost accusatory, gaze.

“Well? When were you going to tell me?” he repeated in a firmer tone.

“I do not know that I was ever going to tell you. I mean, had we been getting married, yes, of course, I was going to tell you. But after last night, I had determined not to. I had been relieved that I had not mentioned it before. You must understand that nobody can hear of this. I will not have our son ridiculed as illegitimate.”

“But he has a right to know that I am his father. You should not have kept him from me. You did not have that right, Catherine.” She had never seen him look like that before; he seemed older and almost like a different man altogether.

Catherine knew he was subject to so many feelings at once that he would be struggling to sort through them. But she had suffered the same herself when she had first discovered she was with child. And she had suffered them alone. As much as Thomas was shocked and

hurting, he had no right to look at her with such accusation.

Suddenly she knew she could not hold on to it all. The time to tell him everything had come, and he would hear it whether he liked it or not.

“Complain all you like, Thomas,” Catherine said and rose angrily to her feet and began to pace back and forth. “For I have yet to have the right to let him know that I am his mother. How dare you feel sorry for yourself, even for a moment?”

“Catherine, please, sit down.” Her sudden outburst seemed to shake him back into reality.

“No, I will not sit,” Catherine said and knew that she could not rest until she had her fury completely spent. “It is so easy for you to see yourself as a victim in this. You are the poor lovelorn man who waited at Stromlyn Lake today whilst the object of his desire left him suffering. You are the man who has only just discovered he is a father, a man who feels wronged because he was not informed. But let me tell you what true suffering is, Thomas. To be exiled and alone and discover myself to be with child was the most terrifying experience imaginable. I had to go to another county altogether to give birth to Henry, and I had to suffer the idea that my beloved child would grow up in an orphanage. Had it not been for my determination and the kindness of my aunt and uncle, that is exactly where Henry would be today. Descended from dukes and earls and growing up in anonymity. But at least I have him with me, even if he thinks that I am nothing more than a distant relative, a niece of his wards, his governess. He calls me *Aunt Catherine*, for heaven’s sake! I have never heard my own child call me Mama, and so I shall not prostrate myself at your feet and beg forgiveness for something that was entirely out of my control.” She almost shouted the last and continued to pace.

“Catherine, I know you are angry with me, but I could not have known. How could I have known it?”

“I know you could not, Thomas; I am just trying to make you understand how hard the last years have been for me, how lonely and frightening at times. Heartbreaking. And I am telling you with certainty that your anger towards me this day is misplaced. I have had to think so carefully about it all, and yes, I did wait these last weeks because I did not truly know what you would do. You have been and still are, engaged to another. And I am bound to tell you that, despite your proposal, the way I have suffered in this life as a result of our love has taught me to be cautious; not to trust a thing is going to happen until it *actually* happens. And last night, I could see that I was right to do so.” She slowed in her pacing, the rage beginning to release its grip on her. “When I saw you last night, arm in arm with your fiancée, I began to wonder if your declaration to me at Stromlyn Lake was nothing but a figment of my imagination. But figment or not, I will not put myself through that again. Whilst there have been moments of joy in my life, moments I will never forget, there have been moments of devastation. I will not live through that again.”

“Catherine, you are not the only person who has been changed by it all. You are not the only person to have their heart crushed to nothing when we were parted. And I have known fear and loneliness, all of the things you describe, but for different reasons. I have known loss and guilt, and yes, it changed me. But it did not change me irreparably; it has not taken away who I am deep-down, and I will not leave this house today until I have your absolute agreement that you will marry me. I will not live without you, and I will not live without my son. I know that I should have acted sooner, that this should be solved by now, but it is not. But just because it is not, does not mean that it will not be. I mean to leave this house today and make everything known to my father.”

“Thomas … I …”

“No, you agreed to marry me, Catherine. I know you love me, and I

know that you know I love you. I will not see everything we have, everything we could have, turned to dust just because you cannot forgive me a little failing." He rose from his seat and advanced upon her. "And I will break my engagement to Eleanor Barchester today, for she is to attend Shawcross Hall this afternoon. It will be done, Catherine, it will be done." And, without another word, he pulled her roughly towards him.

Finally, Catherine could see Thomas, her Thomas, shining through. Her heart was beating wildly and her feelings for him so strong that it was as if they had never been parted.

With one hand wrapped around her waist, Thomas pulled her body against his. With his free hand, he held her face gently before leaning in towards her and kissing her passionately. Catherine was suddenly overwhelmed with her need for him and returned his kisses with equal passion. She wrapped her arms around his neck and clung to him, never wanting to let him go.

Catherine knew now that they would be together forever. She knew that he meant every word he said, that he was the same courageous young man he had always been, the same Thomas. And she knew that he would leave Barford Hall that day and not return until the thing was done.

"Am I to take it that things are settled between you?" Thomas and Catherine broke guiltily apart when Celia Topwell, smiling more broadly than she had ever smiled, walked back into the drawing room. "Anyway, you will be pleased to know that *tea* will be here in a moment."

"Forgive me, Lady Celia, but tea will have to wait," Thomas said and bowed. "I have some business to attend to at Shawcross Hall, and it will not wait another minute."

“Very well, young man. And it is *Mrs* Topwell, not Lady Celia.” She smiled at him mischievously. “Well, go on then, get along with you.”

“As soon as it is done, I will return to you. I will be back today, Catherine.”

Chapter 30

“We have a guest, Thomas!” Penrose Carlton boomed at the top of his voice. “And not just any guest, boy, but your fiancée.” He shook his head to register his disgust. “Now I suggest you smarten yourself up and get into the drawing-room immediately.”

“No, Father,” Thomas said and felt suddenly full of purpose.

He almost welcomed the idea of being disowned, disinherited, for it would mean that he would never again have to listen to his father bellowing at him and treating him like a child. Thomas realized that he had been putting up with it for years, just as Pierce had put up with it before him.

Well, there was to be no more of it.

Thomas was not a child; he was a *father*. He thought immediately of Henry’s beautiful, round face and his eyes. Those pale blue eyes.

That moment of understanding, that absolute knowledge without words that the boy before him was his own son was a moment he would never forget. A moment that would change him forever, only this time, it would be for the better. It would always, always be for the better.

He had a son now, a wonderful, perfect little boy. And Thomas would be a man because of it. He would protect him with his life and never, ever have his child scrabble about for his approval. Henry was here on this earth, living and breathing and utterly perfect. Just his presence gave him intrinsic worth, and Thomas would never let a day go by without making sure that Henry knew it.

And the first act of protection would be this; to stand up to his father

and do so unflinchingly. This was how he would live his life from now on. He would need no more in this world than to know he could protect and cherish his son and the wonderful, beautiful woman who had been his only love.

“What?” His father boomed again.

“I am but three feet from you, Father, there is no need to bellow as if the hall itself is on fire. Really, I cannot begin to tell you how tedious it is.” Already, Thomas was beginning to find his old spirit; the enjoyable insolence of his youth when he had been *the afterthought* and had nothing to lose.

He could hardly believe he had been putting this off, worrying, waiting, procrastinating. His time had come, and he was most certainly going to grab it with both hands.

“What?” his father said again, only this time at a mercifully lower volume. “What is all of this? What do you mean by turning up here late when you have a prior engagement? And what do you mean by talking to me in that manner?”

“And what do *you* mean by talking to me in *that* manner? I am eight and twenty years old and still, you call me *boy!* And you treated Pierce no differently, did you? You barely looked up when he died, barely broke your stride before you started to instruct me the way you had always instructed him. Let me tell you, Father, I am tired of it, and I will take no more of it.”

“And just what do you mean by that? You will take no more of *what?*” Penrose looked for all the world as if he had suddenly realized that his son was making an empty threat.

He looked self-satisfied and arrogant and folded his arms over his fat stomach before treating his son to a patronizing sneer.

“What I *mean* by that is that I will not marry Lady Eleanor Barchester just because she suits you. If she suits you so well, marry her yourself,” Thomas began, and it was as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

He had said it out loud now; he had told his father most determinedly that he would not marry Lady Eleanor Barchester, and marry her he would not. It was done; the thing he had feared for day upon day was done.

“But the announcement ball is just weeks away,” his father said as if the greatest problem under discussion might well be any little invitations he had already made.

“It matters not, Father, for I shall not be there. And neither shall Lady Eleanor Barchester, with or without the most splendid gown known to man. I am not marrying her father, and that is that. I am only angry with myself that I allowed things to get this far, for I have never had any interest in Eleanor Barchester, and well you know it.”

“This is not about interest, boy,” the Duke said and had the decency to look a little perturbed by his habitual use of the word *boy*. “You need not be interested in a woman to marry her, for heaven’s sake. As a matter-of-fact, romantic interest is a hindrance in a good marriage. You need a Duchess, and that is that. A woman of good breeding who is able to bring a little wealth into the duchy. It is not just about securing an heir, Thomas, but about keeping the duchy thriving for years to come. That is how generations of our family have presided over the title and the hall.”

“Your arrogance and your hectoring, Father, have seen to it that I care very little for the fortunes of this duchy. Had you raised Pierce and I in a very different manner, things might well have turned out a little better. But as it is, your attitude has brought you here, Father. It has

brought you to this very day with your only remaining son defying you."

Although the two men were arguing in the entrance hall of Shawcross, they had done so in relative privacy. What staff had been in the area had scurried away at the first sound of raised voices. The servants at Shawcross Hall knew better than to eavesdrop, and every one of them feared their master too much to ever attempt it.

The creaking of the drawing room door and the click of dainty boot heels on the polished tiles drew their attention and silenced them for a moment.

"Eleanor, my dear, please do wait in the drawing room for us," the Duke said, and it seemed that he truly believed she had heard nothing of their conversation. "We just have a couple of matters to attend to and will be with you in no time at all."

"Your Grace, you are very kind, but I think this is a conversation that I ought to be a party to, given that it concerns me greatly," Eleanor said, holding the Duke's gaze firmly.

For a moment, Thomas thought he could almost admire her. She was one of the few people he had ever seen do anything other than placate and pacify the old Duke. But, of course, she was not doing it because she had so firm a backbone, she was simply incensed that she was about to have her plans disarranged.

"Then perhaps we all might retire to the drawing room," the Duke said and sounded vexed beyond measure.

"Why not," Thomas said and knew that it mattered not what happened now; as far as he was concerned, the thing was done.

"Well, it seems that you have come up against your weakness,

Thomas," Eleanor said, and it was clear that she was determined to take the reins of the conversation the moment they were behind the closed door of the drawing room. "But you will make yourself a fool by it, mark my words."

"Meaning what, Eleanor?" Thomas said and was determined to keep calm.

"There is something rather damaged about Catherine Ambrose. For one thing, it would never even occur to me to address her as *Lady* Catherine. I know she is a lady, strictly speaking, but everything I have learned of her life in Derbyshire sounds rather savage. I believe she is addressed as *Miss* Catherine in the wilds of the Peak District." Eleanor laughed.

"I do not see what difference that makes, *Lady* Eleanor," he said sarcastically.

"She is not good enough to be a Duchess, Thomas. She is not made of the right material and probably never was. She is weak and too quick to fall into her own emotions, that sort of woman would never do in a fine hall such as this." She spread an arm wide and rather dramatically.

"I hardly think that Catherine would be at all bothered by that. And Catherine has never sought to be a Duchess, has she? In all her dealings with me, what she might gain for herself materially and in terms of title have not even been a consideration. If you think that is a failing in a woman, then it is very likely that I would never be able to persuade you otherwise." He glared at Eleanor. "But let me tell you that as far as I am concerned, Catherine Ambrose is head and shoulders above all. She far eclipses any other member of her sex that I have met, and I could never marry another whilst she is still alive and in the world somewhere."

“Fine sentiments indeed, Thomas, but you have made an assumption. You have assumed that I will allow an Ambrose to live in this house, to even call herself a duchess, and I shall not.” The Duke of Shawcross looked as if he had fired the decisive shot and was extraordinarily pleased with himself.

“I rather fear that it is you, not I, who have made an assumption,” Thomas said in the strong and self-assured tone he had always wanted to use on his father. “For I had known immediately that your old hatred and determination to win could never be reasoned with. And look where it has brought you, Father. You have continued a ridiculous feud, one that your father and Oscar Ambrose’s father entered into, and they were young men. How can that possibly be important anymore? How can it have meant so much to you that you would see your own son unhappy?”

“You make it sound so simple, and yet it is not,” the Duke said, but he did look wrongfooted.

“But it is so simple, Father.”

“You are letting your heart rule your head, Thomas, and it will not do you any good,” Eleanor chimed in, and he turned to look at her.

If only he could shout it out there and then. If only he could tell the dreadful woman that he had a son, a beautiful son, and nothing else in the world mattered anymore.

“If I thought you were in any way truly upset by this, Eleanor, I would genuinely be sorry for it. But you do not have a heart in your chest, dear lady, and I could fully imagine there to be nothing more than a small hard stone inhabiting the spot where it ought to be, swinging from side to side like the pendulum of a grandfather clock.”

“How clever you think you are, Thomas,” Eleanor said airily.

“You are not heartbroken, my dear lady. You are not upset that you will not spend the rest of your life with me. You care no more for me than you care about anybody else in this sorry world. You are simply annoyed that I have interrupted your plans. You had fully intended to be a duchess, and you would not care who you had to marry to be one. Well, I am sure that there are endless old dukes up and down the country who would be more than willing to fulfill your every demand in life.” He laughed and shook his head. “But I will never be one of them.”

“I think you have said quite enough, Thomas,” his father said in a low and somewhat softer tone. “I think you should go away now and have a very good and long ruminate. I am sure, given time, you will come to your senses. And when you have, then you may come back to me.”

“You do not understand, Father. What you see before you now *is* your son coming to his senses. Finally, and after so long, Thomas Carlton is coming to his senses.” Thomas bowed his head respectfully and turned to leave the room.

Chapter 31

“What do you mean you want to take Henry to Shawcross Hall? No, Thomas, I could not allow that,” Catherine said and felt her emotions had been wrung out enough for one day. “What good could it possibly achieve? You said yourself that your father has disowned you and that you are at peace with it. Why must you now take our son and present him to that man?”

“I do not want to be taken back into my father’s house, Catherine. I know that you and I will be together now forever, and that is all that I could ever want. Just you, me, and Henry.” He smiled and walked over to the drawing room window where she looked out into the dusk.

“Then what? And why? Thomas, forgive me, but I do not understand.”

“I want to show my father exactly what he is losing. I want this feud is to be ended, to be done with. I do not want whichever relative finally takes on the Duchy of Shawcross to inherit this feud and continue it by default. It is time it was over, time it was dead and buried.”

“But that is too much responsibility to put on a young boy.” Catherine turned from the window and looked into his pale, beautiful blue eyes. “You cannot ask it of him.”

“I do not mean to have Henry in the room when I speak to my father; I mean only to introduce him briefly, to let my father lay his eyes upon the boy, that is all.”

“So, Henry will know nothing of it? Henry will not realize that he has such a responsibility?” Catherine felt dubious.

If she was honest, she was not entirely sure she cared what became of the Duchy of Shawcross in future generations. But she still loved her

son dearly and wondered if he might suffer one day on account of her indifference.

“He will not have any responsibility on his shoulders at all, Catherine. I know I am newly a father, but I would never dream of doing anything that would hurt my son. On the contrary, I would already lay down my life for him. I can still hardly describe to you my feelings when I looked upon his face and knew him to be mine.” Catherine could see that Thomas’ eyes were shining with emotion, tears that he blinked back and did not shed.

“I know, Thomas. I know.” She turned and walked into his open arms, leaning her head wearily against his chest. “This has been quite a day for us, has it not? I am so tired.”

“I know, my love. But after all my prevarication, I must have it all done now. When I lay my head down to sleep tonight, I must know that it is all finished, that there is nothing left to be done, no loose ends.”

“As tired as I am, I am relieved to see *my* Thomas back before me again,” she said and felt her love for him stirring in her chest.

“And I am glad to be myself again, for I have been too long without you. I will never be without you again, my love, I must have you know that.”

“I do know it, and I have never been more certain of anything.”

“Then you will let me take Henry with me now, finish this thing once and for all?” he said and raised his eyebrows.

“Not without me,” she said in a firm tone. “And today is not the day for Henry to discover his origins. There has been too much else of high emotion, and I would like to tell him when I can give the matter

my fullest attention."

"Yes, I understand."

"So, Henry is not to discover on purpose or by accident anything he should not discover today. I will stay with Henry, and he is to overhear nothing, do you understand?"

"Yes, I will make sure of it."

"And you will only call upon Henry for long enough that your father may look upon him and know him to be his grandson. But you must make your father very well aware that he is to say nothing, for if he hurts my child, I will make him sorry for it. You must tell him that; you must tell him those exact words, Thomas. These are my stipulations, and I am unbending."

"I would expect nothing less from you, my beautiful, courageous Catherine." He kissed her forehead and lightly ran his hand through her soft brown hair. "I love you so much."

"And I love you too; otherwise, I would not allow any of this."

"You must trust me this one last time, please."

"Yes," she said and touched his face. "I will collect Henry now and tell him that we are to have the honour of a quick look around the fine Shawcross estate. I will introduce him to you properly, as Lord Thomas Carlton, and tell him that he is to meet your father the Duke briefly. Henry is young and excitable and will accept all of it at face value."

"Thank you."

By the time they were in the carriage and on their way to Shawcross

Hall, Henry had already moved seats so that he could be next to his new acquaintance, and he chattered to him endlessly. Catherine watched with an aching heart as Henry regaled Thomas with tales of all the trees he had climbed, asking him exactly how many trees there were on his own estate. Were there as many as there were at Barford Hall? Were there any so tall that a boy might climb and climb never reaching the top?

Thomas answered all of Henry's questions happily, and Catherine could see the deep need in his eyes to have Henry know him as his father.

She wondered if that need had been so obvious in her own eyes for all of Henry's life, and she looked forward to the day when Henry would finally address her as his mother.

When they drew up outside Shawcross Hall, Catherine felt a deep fear which she knew she must get on top of. She could not allow Henry to see how unsettled she was for she did not want him to realize that there was something more for him to know.

"So, as we said?" she said quietly in Thomas' ear.

"As we said."

As soon as they were inside the building, Thomas summoned a maid and asked her to escort Catherine and Henry to the library.

"You will be quite alright in here for a few minutes," Thomas said brightly to them both. "And then as soon as it is done, Henry, I will drive you around the estate in the carriage and show you some of the tallest trees by moonlight. What do you say to that?"

"Oh yes please," Henry said excitedly.

“Well, this should not take long,” he said to Catherine and then turned to leave.

With the maid disappeared to fetch a glass of milk for Henry, Catherine hurried to the library door and peered out to see in which direction Thomas was going. She had a deep sense that she wanted to know exactly where he was. And not only that, but she had a burning desire to know exactly what was being said.

She saw Thomas disappear through a door at the top of the corridor and, when he did not reappear within seconds, she knew that the Duke must surely be in there.

“Is everything alright, My Lady?” the maid said nervously when she returned holding a small tray with a glass of milk on it for Henry and a small sherry on it for Catherine.

“Oh yes, perfectly alright, thank you,” Catherine said with a smile and returned to the library and sat down next to Henry at a large round table.

Catherine took a few sips of her sherry and smiled at the maid.

“My dear, we will be perfectly alright in here. You need not wait with us, really.”

“Very well, My Lady,” the young woman said and curtsied before turning to leave.

“What is Lord Carlton doing?” Henry said in that absent way of a child who is already concentrating fully on his new surroundings.

“He is just having a few words with his father, Henry. And after that, you will get to meet his father for a moment, but not for long. You need only say hello to him, and then we shall have a look at the trees,

just as Thomas said. And he is a Duke, so you must call him *Your Grace*."

"May I have a look at one of the books?" Henry said as he twisted in his seat and stared at so many. "There are more books here than there are at Ivy Manor."

"I know, a great many more. Let me see if I can find something that you might like." Catherine quickly scanned the first few shelves and was very pleased when she alighted upon natural history.

She removed one and opened it, quickly leafing through the pages until she found some neatly sketched dinosaurs.

"Here, how about this one?" She laid it open in front of him on the table, and he peered closely at it, seeming to be immediately absorbed.

"Oh yes," he said quietly.

"Henry, I am going to leave you here for a moment reading your book. I just need to have a quick word with Thomas, will you be alright?"

"Oh yes," he said, giving every impression that he had hardly heard her.

"And you must be careful with your milk, Henry. Take care that you do not splash any of it onto the book, alright?"

"Yes, Aunt Catherine," he said and did not even look up at her.

Catherine, gathering that she would only be gone a matter of minutes, pulled the library door closed behind her and scampered off along the corridor as quietly as she could. When she arrived at the doorway she had seen Thomas disappear through, she realized that the door was

very slightly ajar.

She could hear raised voices through it with ease and held her breath, listening intently for any movement which suggested somebody leaving the room. She was ready to turn and run at the slightest indication.

“What are you telling me?” Catherine thought it strange that although she had not spent any real time in the Duke of Shawcross’ company, still she knew his arrogant, acidic tones.

“For goodness sake, I would have thought that it was a simple enough deduction, Father,” Thomas said, and Catherine was amazed by the steel in his voice. She had always known that he had courage and confidence, but it had always come along with a certain amount of amusement; humour. This time there was no humour; this was the voice of a man, a man who was determined to have the truth said. “When Catherine was exiled from Hertfordshire, unbeknownst to the both of us, she was with child. *My child*. I knew nothing of this all these years because, between you, you and the Earl of Barford saw to it that we could never find a way to communicate. But now that I know my son, now that I have met him, I will not be parted from him again. And I will not be parted from Catherine either, Father, because I love her. I do not care that you think such feelings ridiculous, for you are not me, and I am not you.”

“She still has the child with her?” The Duke sounded incredulous.

“Yes, Catherine has more courage than anybody I know. She refused to let him go into an orphanage and the Topwells, the family with whom she stayed, helped her to be able to keep him.”

“Then they must be pariahs in Derbyshire to allow such a situation under their roof.”

“Is that all that matters to you, Father? And they are not pariahs because even the child himself does not know that Catherine is his mother. And you will not tell it to him either or I will make you sorry for it.”

“And why would I tell it to him?”

“Because you are to meet him in a few moments, Father. Only for long enough to say *good evening,* and that is it.”

“Then what is the point of it?”

“The point of it is I want you to see what you have lost. Finally, I want you to see where this dreadful, destructive feud has brought you. I want you to realize that you will be a man alone, silently waiting to die so that he might hand over his beloved duchy to a distant relative. I want you to look at my son with your own eyes and know that he is not only descended from you, but he is descended from the Earl of Barford. I want you to realize that if you continue this feud … if you pass it on to whomever the Duchy finally resides with, then you will not just be hurting Ambrose blood, you will be hurting Carlton blood. That is all I want. I want you to look upon him and remember his face. I want you to know that you would be hurting your own grandson if you continue in this futility.”

“This all seems to be rather unreal somehow. I can hardly imagine that any of this is true, and yet I can see from your look that it is.” Catherine listened with interest as she heard the fire and anger seem to evaporate from the Duke’s voice. “But you have put this upon me so suddenly, have you not? Without warning, I have a grandson.”

“And without warning, Sir, I had a son.”

“Yes.”

“And the reason it all came without warning was because you and Oscar Ambrose could not reconcile differences that were not even your own. Had you grown out of such childishness when you were much younger men, Catherine and I would not have had to suffer as we have suffered these last eight years. Henry would not have thought himself to be an orphan all his young life. And Pierce would not have had to die, for he might well not have spent so much of his life trying to please you and gain your approval that he betrayed me to do it.”

“What on earth do you mean?” The Duke hardly sounded like himself, and Catherine could feel her throat tightening with emotion.

“Pierce betrayed me to gain your approval, just as I said. But when he saw the devastation it wreaked on my life and Catherine’s, he began to feel guilty. And not only that, but he recognized the futility when he saw that he could *never* gain your approval. From that moment on, he tried to atone for what he had done, but I was so hurt and so angry that I would not let him. I missed Catherine so much that I felt as if my heart had been ripped from my chest. How could I forgive him for what he had done? And then, when he could stand it no more, when I had turned my back on him one last time, Pierce chased me through the fields and that, Father, is how he came to be killed. So, can you not see the chain of events? The chain of events which link us back through time to your own father and Oscar Ambrose’s father? Imagine if things had been stopped then, would Pierce still be alive now?”

“You have never mentioned this before,” the Duke said and sounded oddly broken.

“Because I had never seen the point in telling you before. You have never listened; you have only shouted and ordered and directed. You are never quiet for long enough to hear another person speak.”

“Yes,” he said, and Catherine realized that she was listening to a man finally coming to terms with the consequences of his actions.

“Catherine and I should have been married years ago, and Henry would have been born within wedlock and known us both to be his parents. That is what you have taken from us, you and Oscar Ambrose. I do not confront you with the truth of Pierce’s death simply to hurt you, Father. I am beyond such simple and pointless acts of vengeance now. I just want you to understand the devastation that is caused by the refusal to let go of past injustices, old arguments that should have died a generation ago. And when you come to that conclusion, I want you to be looking at your grandson’s face.”

“He is here?”

“He is here, Father. I will fetch him now, and you may say no more than *good evening* to him. He is not to find out on this night anything of his origins, do you understand?”

“Yes.”

Catherine could hardly believe that she had witnessed roles reversing. It was not the Duke giving out orders now, but Thomas. And yet she knew that Thomas was doing so out of the highest intentions, and she could not imagine loving him more.

When Thomas walked out of the room, Catherine did nothing to hide herself. She just silently walked into his arms and clung tightly to him for a moment. She kissed his cheek, took his hand, and led him back towards the library so that they might collect Henry together.

“I will come in with you, Thomas,” she said firmly. “I will come into the room with you and Henry, and I will not have it any other way.”

“Of course.”

“Henry? Do you like that book?” Thomas said in a much more

cheerful tone of voice.

“Yes, very much.” Henry turned in his seat to look at the new acquaintance he had already come to admire.

“Then you may keep it. You may take it home with you.”

“What do you say, Henry?” Catherine said by instinct, always keen that Henry should have good manners.

“Thank you very much, Lord Carlton,” Henry said neatly.

“Now then, might I very quickly introduce you to my father before we set off to have a look at the trees?” Thomas reached out for Henry’s hand.

“Yes, of course.” Henry closed his book and tucked it under his arm before taking Thomas’ hand.

Catherine walked along behind them as they made their way back along the corridor. Side-by-side, it was clear that Henry was simply a smaller version of his father. He had his father’s languid way of walking, and there was not a shade to choose between their red-brown hair.

Thomas pushed open the door and walked Henry in. Catherine walked in behind them, and the Duke immediately looked at her. She held her breath for a moment, fully expecting him to regain his old animosity and let fly at her, but he did not. He simply nodded his head and looked down at his grandson.

“Father, this is Henry Topwell. He has come to meet you.”

“Hello, Henry.”

“Hello, Your Grace,” Henry said, bursting with boyish confidence despite the formality of his address.

“Goodness me, I do not think you need to address me quite so formally.” The Duke crouched down so that he was on a level with Henry, and Catherine was amazed to see that his eyes were shining with tears.

“Aunt Catherine told me that *that* was how I must address you, Your Grace. You *are* the Duke, you know.” Henry grinned broadly and showed no sign that he was at all uncomfortable in the old Duke’s presence.

And, for his part, the Duke of Shawcross threw his head back and laughed.

“Quite so, my dear Henry.”

Epilogue

Catherine could never have imagined that life at Shawcross Hall would be as easy and as uncomplicated as it turned out to be. It was as if Henry, completely unwittingly, had been the only person who had the power not only to thaw-out a belligerent old man but to entirely dissolve a feud which had begun almost a century before.

Just as promised, Thomas had kept the meeting between his father and his son brief, not wanting to linger any longer than was necessary, lest Henry realize that all was not as simple as it appeared.

Assuming himself to be disowned, just as his father had told him he would be, Thomas was consoled with the idea that he had finally ended the feud and that his son would never suffer on account of it.

The following morning, however, the Duke of Shawcross arrived at Barford Hall in his carriage and walked up to the front door of that grand building for the first time in his life.

He was first taken to Philip Ambrose, the Earl of Barford, where he was greeted with polite warmth and made welcome.

With his respects paid to the head of the household, the Duke of Shawcross was taken to the morning room where his son was having tea with Catherine Ambrose.

Begging Catherine to stay, the Duke told them of his intention to pass the Duchy to its rightful heir, Thomas Carlton when the time came. And, in terms more human than Thomas could ever have imagined, the old Duke expressed a wish that Thomas, Catherine, and his new grandson reside at Shawcross Hall as soon as they were married.

Catherine had had the greatest of misgivings, but she had kept them to herself largely. Thomas had been prepared to give up everything for her and Henry and had done everything in his power to end the feud. The least she could do in return was allow him his heritage and his inheritance.

After a quiet wedding, they had moved into Shawcross Hall with Henry. The Duke had understood fully that it would take time before they could tell Henry everything, that they wanted him to get used to things by stages.

They took him every week to see Philip at Barford Hall, and Uncle Charles and Aunt Celia still played a vital part in his life, as they always had and always would.

Catherine had been determined that they would continue to spend time in Derbyshire at Ivy Manor, not to mention the fact that Charles and Celia spent a good deal of time at Barford Hall with Philip.

Catherine explained to the Duke that Henry had been raised by a collection of people who had cared for him greatly, and she did not want to see that end. As far as she was concerned, that would not change, and the Duke was more than welcome to join that collection of people and help raise a fine young man if that was his pleasure.

By letting go of the past, Catherine had found a tentative peace in her relationship with the Duke of Shawcross. Penrose Carlton had certainly been mellowed by his discovery of a grandson, and Catherine knew that she would have to forgive the man in order for everything to truly be changed in the way that Thomas had wanted.

When they had been married for some months, Catherine and Thomas decided the time had come for them to finally explain Henry's origins to him fully. They had taken him to Barford Hall so that Charles and Celia might be there to help with it all.

“Uncle Charles, are we to go fishing today? It is a fine day, and I am sure that Uncle Philip would not mind if we did,” Henry said excitedly when he ran into the drawing room of Barford Hall and flung himself at Charles Topwell.

“Yes, I think we can go fishing today,” Charles said as he scooped the boy into his arms and gave him a thoroughly hard squeeze. “But we do have something to talk about today, young man. We have all sorts of things to tell you, you see, and you might feel a little bit knocked sideways by it all. But if you do still want to go fishing at the end of it, I shall come with you.”

Catherine smiled at her uncle, grateful that he had already decided to introduce the idea of a rather deep and revealing discussion. She took a deep breath before speaking and felt Celia at her side, there as always to help her.

“Uncle Charles is right, Henry, we do have rather a lot of things to tell you today,” Catherine began nervously. “And the thing is, there are all sorts of things you do not know, things which you ought to know now. You might find yourself a little upset by some of it, and you might be a little angry at times. Whatever you feel is right, my dear. You need not hide anything, and if you want to cry or shout, you may do just that, do you understand?”

“Yes, Aunt Catherine. But what is it? What is so bad that I am going to be so angry?” Henry clambered up onto the couch next to Charles. Catherine sat at his side, and Thomas sat in an armchair opposite.

“Well, you know that Thomas and I are now married, do you not?”

“Of course I do. I was there in the church, Catherine. I am not silly,” he said in an adorably offended manner.

“I know, Henry.” Catherine laughed.

“What of it?” Henry went on.

“Henry, when you were born, I was very young, and it was impossible for me to tell you at the time that I am not your Aunt Catherine really, but I am your mother. You are my child, my dear.” Catherine’s heart was beating like a drum, and she studied Henry intently.

“Yes, I know,” Henry said and screwed his face up a little and shrugged.

“What do you mean you know?” Catherine was absolutely amazed.

“I just know, Aunt Catherine.” He shrugged again. “I do not know how I knew, but I always knew. It was easy to know it, even though I cannot explain it. But I do not think there was a time when I did not know it if that helps at all.”

“Yes, Henry, it helps enormously,” Catherine said and quickly dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief.

“Why are you crying? Why are you so sad?”

“I am not sad, Henry, I am happy.” Catherine sniffed.

“Will I still have to call you *Aunt Catherine*, or may call you Mama now?” Henry folded his arms across his little chest, all business, and looked at her intently.

“I should very much like you to call me Mama if you would like to.”

“Oh, yes please.” Henry grinned, and Catherine could see Celia mopping her eyes furiously.

Even Charles was struggling with his emotion; she could tell by the way he fixed his attention upon a vase in the corner of the room and blinked hard.

“There is something else we have to tell you, Henry,” Thomas began gently. “Would you be happy to hear a little more?”

“Yes please, Thomas,” Henry said and gave every impression that he was thoroughly enjoying the whole thing.

Catherine could hardly believe how much she had worried, how greatly she thought her son would be affected by all the news. And yet now he looked for all the world as if he was going to be unaffected entirely.

“I do not expect you to understand how it all works now, but when you grow up to be a young man, you will,” Thomas began. “But you must know that you have a father too, as well as a mother.”

“Yes, of course. Everybody does.”

“Well, would it surprise you to know that I am your father?”

“No, it would not,” Henry said simply and shrugged again.

“My goodness, but you are a clever boy,” Thomas said and smiled at him. “A very clever boy.”

“I could tell when I looked at you, Thomas. Your hair is just like mine, and your eyes are too. And Aunt Catherine, I mean *Mama*, looked so sad when we first met when Uncle Philip brought me in and you were here.” Henry paused and wrinkled his little nose in lengthy thought. “And then you cried, and I knew I was right. I felt like I already knew you. I felt like I have always felt with Aunt Ca … Mama.”

“My dear little Henry.” Thomas rose from his seat and moved to kneel in front of his son. “Do you mind very much?”

“No, I do not mind at all.” Henry was grinning at him. “I like you very much, Thomas. You let me climb trees, just like Uncle Philip does. Am I to call you Papa now?”

“Yes, if you would like to?”

“Yes, I think I would like that,” Henry said and nodded thoughtfully before turning to look at his Uncle Charles. “Well, now that is all done, might we go fishing? I am not at all upset, Uncle Charles, I promise.”

“Well, why not?” Charles said and rose to his feet as he surreptitiously dashed a little tear from the corner of one of his eyes. “We shall catch the biggest fish in the lake and have the cook serve it up to Aunt Celia for her dinner,” he said mischievously.

“We ought not to, Uncle Charles. Aunt Celia does not like fish,” Henry said and chuckled.

“Come along,” Charles said and led the boy from the room.

“Good heavens, he made that extraordinarily easy for us, did he not?” Catherine said and let out a great sigh of relief.

“He most certainly did. He truly is a wonderful boy,” Thomas said, his voice thick with emotion.

“I am just going to follow them and make sure that they both put their warm coats on,” Celia said and discreetly darted from the room.

“So, everything is finally as it should have been, is it not?” Catherine said and let her tears of happiness fall as she faced her husband and

reached out for his hands.

“It took a long time to get here, my love, but we are here now. After everything that has happened, everything that has hurt us, we now have everything we ever wanted. I am determined only to be grateful and never look back.”

“And so am I. It is the only way to live; I truly believe that. We have blown out the flame of the old feud, and it is up to us to see that it is never reignited.” Catherine finally leaned against him and felt the warmth and strength of his arms as they enveloped her.

“You see, I always knew that we *afterthoughts* would come in useful in the end. It seems that we did have a purpose after all.” Thomas laughed, and she could feel the deep rumble of it in his chest.

“I love you more and more every day, Thomas.”

“And I will love you for the rest of my life, Catherine,” he said and kissed the top of her head.

THE END

Can't get enough of Catherine and Thomas? Then make sure to check out the Extended Epilogue to find out…

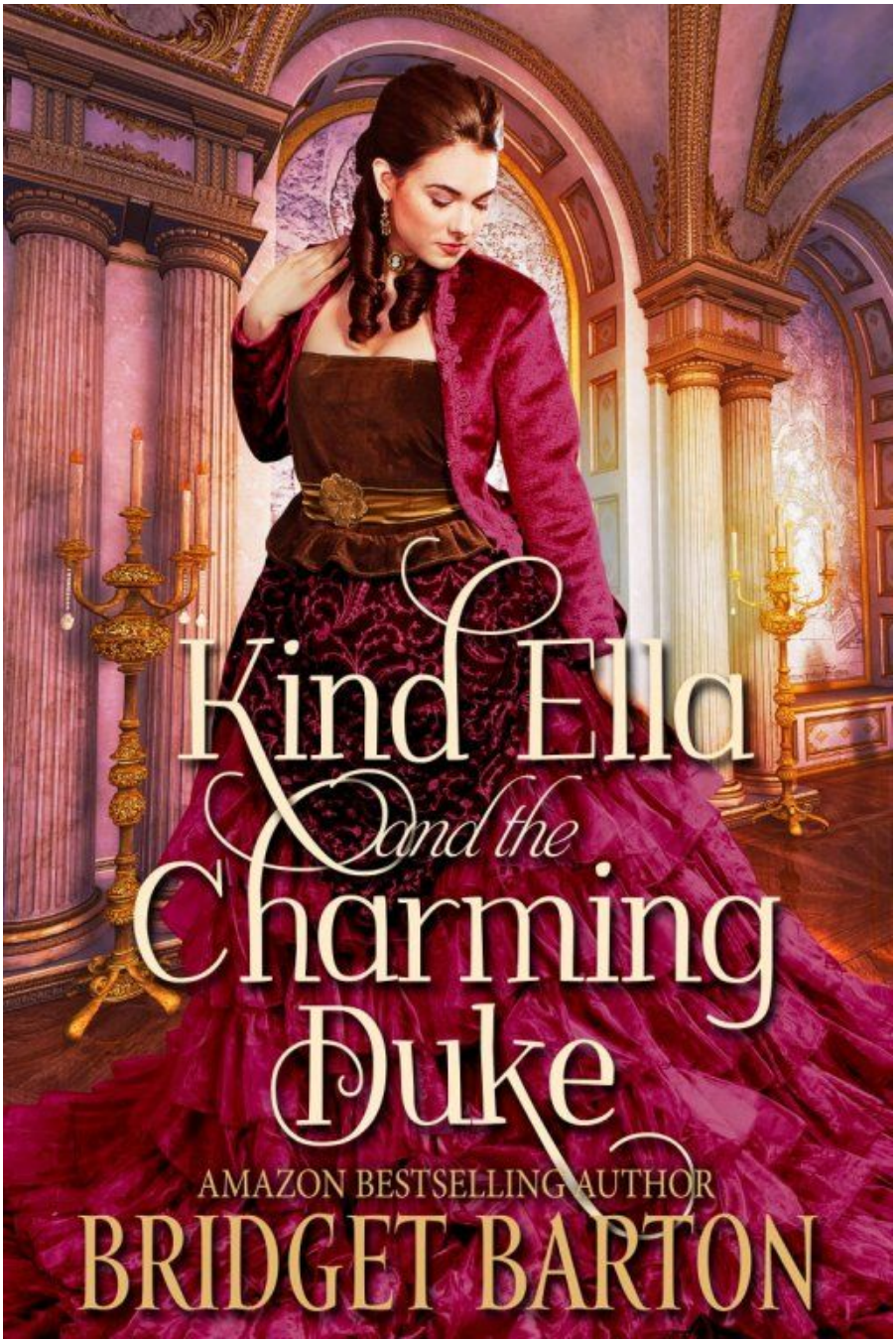
Will the old Duke of Shawcross be able to admit his mistakes and ask for forgiveness?

How will Henry, the adorable little boy, develop?

Will Catherine and Thomas ever forgive the old Duke?

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(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from ***"Kind Ella and the Charming Duke"****, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*


Kind Ella
and the
Charming
Duke
AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BRIDGET BARTON

Kind Ella and the Charming Duke

Introduction

Following the death of her beloved father, Ella Winfield is devastated when her mother, a woman with untamed social aspirations, hastily marries the Earl of Dandridge. He is a humorless man, and one whom Ella does not trust for a moment. Leaving her beloved Longton Manor behind, Ella is cast adrift in the large and unwelcoming Dandridge Hall, despite her desperate plea that her mother need not marry at all.

The Earl's daughters, Lady Patience and Lady Georgiana, are spoiled and manner less young ladies, used to their own way in all things and fiercely competitive with one another. But when the Duke of Hillington is reported to be searching for a suitable bride, the tension between the sisters reaches new heights. With Ella's simple beauty, intelligence, and fine manners, the Earl seeks to hide her away from the world and, more importantly, the Duke of Hillington himself.

When he determines that Ella not attend a masquerade ball to which the whole family has been invited, Ella takes it upon herself to attend in disguise and spy on the ambitious little family for her own amusement. When she finds herself in anonymous conversation with the Duke himself, she realizes that there is more to him than a man who would seek nothing more than a pretty bride with a large dowry. He is open and amusing and she finds herself quite captivated.

Rufus Darnley, the Duke of Hillington, cannot shake from his mind the curious and exciting young woman who appeared at his masquerade ball uninvited, and he can no longer find any enthusiasm for his search for a wife with whom he might provide an heir to the Duchy. When he finds the discarded mask of the mysterious woman who left the ball without a word, he holds on to the hope that he might one day discover her true identity.

As the Earl of Dandridge plots the most appalling schemes to keep the Duke interested in his own daughters, Ella Winfield must do what she can to stop the man she is fast becoming attracted to from being steered in the direction of either Lady Patience or Lady Georgiana, all without being discovered by the family who have, one by one, turned their backs upon her.

Chapter 1

“Mama, forgive me, but do you intend to marry Ronald Belville?” Ella Winfield sounded as dejected as she felt.

“We shall just have to wait and see, my dear.” Ariadne Winfield was trying to dissuade Ella from her questioning, and Ella knew as much.

“Mama, it is a simple enough question. After all, he has made no secret of his interest in you, and I can see no sign that you have attempted to escape his interest, even though Papa passed away less than a year ago.” Every time Ella alluded to the death of her beloved father, the familiar grief swept over her, weakening her each time.

“Are you concerned that I would not see out my full period of mourning?” Ariadne looked affronted.

Ariadne Winfield often looked affronted, especially when her motives were being called into question. And when she was not affronted, the wife of the late Baron Winfield was generally dissatisfied with life and everything in it.

Ella had always known that her parents’ marriage had certainly not been a match made in heaven, but she had also known that her father would have given anything for it to be so. Her mother, on the other

hand, always had the air of a woman who regretted marrying in haste and wished she had waited for a better prospect to come her way.

But Ariadne had come from much humbler beginnings. The daughter of Sir Robert Addington, she had been forced to work as a governess when her father had died, and the extent of his debts became apparent.

No longer a gentlewoman, Ariadne had not enjoyed her reduced status. When Lord Winfield, a baron and close friend of the family for whom she was working showed an interest in her, Ariadne had jumped at the chance to rescue herself from a life of obscurity, in a world where she was neither fish nor fowl.

The young Ariadne Addington had not languished in the lonely life of the governess for more than six months before she agreed to marry Winston Winfield. But it was clear that she had never loved him; he was simply a means to an end. He was the man who would make her a woman of note again, not a gentlewoman fallen on hard times, but Lady Winfield, *a baroness*.

Ella had never known if her father had realized it at the time when he had first asked the young governess to marry him, or if he was blinded by his love for her, so much so that he would have taken her on any terms.

But Ariadne's dissatisfaction had grown and grown over the years until it had become a tangible thing with what seemed like a life of its own. And it was clear to Ella that her beloved father had noticed it then, even if he had not seen it all those years ago.

"Well, is that what is upsetting you so?" her mother spoke again when Ella had been silent for some moments.

"I beg your pardon?" Ella was a little startled by her mother's sharp tone.

"You are concerned that I am not going to wait out my one-year period of mourning?"

"That is not *all* I am concerned about, Mama," Ella said, wondering at her mother's shallow attention to nothing more than what was considered proper. "And just the idea that you are waiting out your twelve months and nothing more is something that I find extremely upsetting. After all, Papa was very much more than a man whose passing should be hurriedly counted away on one's fingers."

"As usual you are being obtuse, my dear," Ariadne said sharply. "You are not at all practical, Ella, and I feel certain that it will one day be your downfall."

"I am practical enough, Mama, when there is a need of it. But I do not

need to be practical about the loss of my father. He is more than a few months of mourning to me, even now when he is no longer with us. It pains me that you are not struck in the same way."

"You do not know what does or does not strike me, Ella." Ariadne glared at her, her dark brown eyes glassy and her features seeming to become more pointed than ever.

It was a tone and countenance which Ella recognized with ease. Ariadne had a vaguely aggressive manner when she could not add anything of worth to an argument and instead sought to put the whole thing to an end.

But Ella had seen and heard it all before and was not fooled by any of it. And she knew exactly what did and did not *strike* her mother, even if Ariadne herself seemed so sure that she did not.

"Mama, the Earl of Dandridge does not have a reputation as a good man." Ella was not about to let it go. "He is not spoken of warmly in society."

"Men of power and wealth seldom are my dear. It is just the way of the world, and you will one day come to recognize the petty jealousies of others," Ariadne said in a condescending way as she treated her daughter to a smile which suggested she was simply tolerating her daughter's ignorance of the way of things.

“So, you think that people only talk ill of him because they are jealous? That they say that he is a man of no loyalty and short temper simply because he is more wealthy and powerful than they are? All of them, Mama?” Ella spoke incredulously, keen to let her mother know that she was not as naive in such matters as she had been accused. “Or do you perhaps hear and see what it is you wish to hear and see, Mama?”

“I have seen nothing in Ronald Bellville’s character which would make me suspect that he is anything other than a good man,” Ariadne said defiantly.

“I think you are just determined to see him so, Mama.”

“And why is that? Why would I be so determined to see him as a good man if he is not?”

“Because I believe that you wish to marry him, Mama.”

“And why would I wish to marry a man if I did not truly think him good?”

“I do not know,” Ella said although the truth of the matter was that she *did* know.

But, at that moment, Ella could not imagine how it was she would say to her mother outright that she believed her a title hunter, an ambitious woman with little or no regard for the memory of her very fine husband and the welfare and happiness of her own daughter. For that was exactly how Ella saw it, and she knew, deep down, that it was the truth.

Ella was not a naive young woman, far from it. She had a keen intellect and was an extraordinarily good judge of character. These were things that she thanked her father for, blessings which he had passed down to her, she was sure.

And, having only met Ronald Belville on the two occasions he had attended her mother at home, Ella had judged that every misgiving the people of their acquaintance had about the Earl was true. It was not anything he had said, nor anything he had done, but there was something about the man which spoke of an ill temper and ruthlessness that Ella did not want to become any better acquainted with.

“Then you will agree that you are simply being silly, my dear.” Ariadne smiled triumphantly.

Ella was so antagonized that she almost told her everything that had crossed her mind there and then, without sparing her feelings at all.

Instead, she took a deep breath and held it, just as her father had always taught her, and rose from her seat to cross the drawing room and look out of the window.

As Ella stared out across the beautiful gardens, so natural and free, allowing a little disorder here and there, she was struck by the awful feeling that Longton Manor might not be her home for very much longer.

There were trees everywhere and such wonderful arrangements of beds, many of which contained wildflowers. Lord Winfield had always been keen on the garden and had developed a long and respectful relationship with the old gardener, Jameson. Between them, they had created a garden that was just out of the common way. It did not quite conform to the neatness and rigidity that was the current fashion; a fashion which always seemed to Ella to make the outside world look like the inside world. People were so keen to show off fine gardens that they had almost become akin to well-decorated drawing rooms.

But the grounds at Longton Manor were a wonderful break with the new tradition. They spoke to Ella of nature and true beauty, instead of the peacock form of beauty which always seemed to thrive by denying nature instead of embracing it.

To society now, nature was something to be tamed, to be controlled. It had to be cut away and held in check, with every blade of grass

standing to attention at exactly the same height as its neighbour. Where was the real beauty in that?

“Mama,” Ella began again in a cautious tone. “We have everything we need here. We have been fortunate that the Manor and all of Papa’s money has been left to us. We have a fine home and our circumstances, in terms of wealth and security, have not changed because Papa has passed.”

“I know,” Ariadne said a little impatiently.

No doubt she thought she had won the argument for that day.

“We do not need to search for security elsewhere.”

“And you think I am searching for security with the Earl of Dandridge?” She arched her eyebrows so high that she looked like a different woman altogether.

“Perhaps.” Ella could feel her confidence waning as she looked at her mother’s fierce expression.

“I do not need security, Ella. But I do want something more than this.” She spread her arms wide and looked disdainfully around her.

“More than this?” Ella was hurt and offended, and it was clear in her

voice.

“Oh, you are too much your father’s daughter. You are so painfully content with everything around you that you frustrate me almost as much as he did.” Ariadne was forgetting herself.

“This is a fine home, Mama, and Papa was a fine man.” Ella felt anger surge through her. “How can you look around you with such dissatisfaction?”

“Because I want more than this. I am tired of making do.”

“How on earth can this life we have here be described as *making do*? Papa provided well for us both. We have never been without any of the things we wanted or needed. I have never had to make do, as you put it Mama, and neither have you.”

“Do not raise your voice, Ella.”

“Forgive me, Mama, but I am so frustrated. I feel as if you are insulting Papa and everything he did for you.”

“Oh, because I was *a governess*, you think I ought to be grateful?”

“Not grateful, Mama, but gracious, yes. You talk as if Papa has done you some great disservice all these years. And you talk as if we are in

the gutter when the Winfields are a fine old family of wealth and standing."

"You have no ambition for yourself at all." Ariadne rose from the neat brocade covered couch and made her way to the fireplace. She pulled the bell rope for tea and turned back to look at her daughter. "I dread to think what sort of a match you might make one day."

"When I marry, Mama, it will be for love."

"Then you are as much a fool as your father raised you to be. Really, the times I begged him to urge you into one direction or another regarding a suitable husband, but no, he would not have his precious daughter forced in any way, even for her own good," she huffed loudly. "And now, here you are, a woman of twenty years with no suitors on the horizon and a romantic notion that the best marriages are made for love alone, without any thought to status, wealth, or the future."

"Is status so important to you, Mama? After all, you are already a baroness."

"A Baroness? What is that when I might be a …" At the last moment, Ariadne remembered herself.

"A countess?" Ella supplied a little sarcastically. "After all, if you

married the Earl of Dandridge, that is what you would be. You would no longer be Baroness Winfield, but the Countess of Dandridge." Ella's voice was almost a whisper.

Would her mother finally admit the truth to her? Or would she continue to try to hide it?

"There is nothing wrong with wanting better, Ella." Ariadne's tone was much calmer than Ella had been expecting; it was almost peaceful.

"There is no man on this earth better than my father was." Ella felt treacherous; she hated her mother at that moment.

"You have a good deal of growing up to do, my dear."

"No, I do not." Ella rose from her seat to leave the room.

"Where are you going? I have sent for tea." Her mother had such a total lack of awareness that she looked most aggrieved that her daughter would think to leave when tea was coming.

"I do not want to sit with you," Ella said truthfully. "You have already decided to marry Ronald Belville, and the rest is simply a shallow adherence to propriety. You are waiting out your one year, and that is all. And you are waiting it out most impatiently as if the whole thing

is not so much grieving as it is an inconvenience."

"If I marry the Earl, then that is my choice and not yours. But you should think carefully, my dear. After all, you would be coming with me to live in Dandridge Hall." Incredibly, Ariadne began to sound excited. "Just think of that! What a fine life you would have in so great a mansion."

"I could not bear to leave Longton Manor. I care nothing for fine mansions and every luxury. I want my life here in the home of my father."

"If I marry, it will no longer be the home of your father."

Ella felt suddenly hot and nauseous. She had not even thought about the fate of Longton Manor if her mother married again. But, of course, everything that was now theirs would instantly become the property of the Earl the moment he married her mother.

They would be at that man's mercy for their safety and security; they would literally be giving up everything. And why? So that her selfish, ambitious mother could be known by all as the Countess of Dandridge and have even more servants at her disposal than she already did.

And Ella would be forced to live in a strange house with a man she did not like and a family she did not yet know.

“Mama, please, you must think about this. We would have nothing of our own anymore. We would be at that man’s mercy.”

“You silly girl! We would have everything our hearts desire!”

“No, we would have everything *your* heart desires, Mama, not mine. You do not know what is in my heart.”

“And at this moment, I do not care to,” Ariadne said sharply. “For you are not being very sensible and you do not deserve my consideration if you are going to behave like this.”

“I do not remember having your consideration before, Mama, so I shall not notice its loss.”

“Perhaps you should leave now. I do not think I care to take tea with you after all.” Ariadne turned to look across the drawing room, casually dismissing her daughter as if she were staff.

Without another word, Ella quietly made her way out of the drawing room.

Chapter 2

Rufus Darnley sat behind his great oak desk in the study at Hillington Hall, his elbows leaning heavily on a stack of papers whilst he rested his chin in his hands.

“Your Grace, I think it is a very wise decision.” Henry Mercer, the attorney, looked at the Duke of Hillington through grey, kindly looking eyes. “After all, at five and thirty, I daresay the time has come.”

“Yes, I am sure it has, Henry.” There was something defeated in his tone, something so resigned as if he were being led up the steps to the gallows. “I suppose I had always thought that I might one day happen across a young woman I had something in common with.”

“I think it is so rare a thing, Your Grace, that to act practically is a very much more sensible solution. At least when you approach the thing with common sense, you are able to choose a young lady on her qualities, her very suitability to be your wife. I am afraid that when the heart is followed, such common sense flies out of the window.”

“I cannot tell whether your words are making me feel better or worse, Henry. There is a part of me which applauds your practicality on the issue, and another which feels as if all hope is squashed.” Rufus

laughed.

“I think hope comes with practicality, your Grace.” Henry Mercer laughed also.

It had been a very long time coming, but Rufus felt a certain sense of relief now that he had enlisted his attorney’s help in the matter of finding himself a suitable bride. At five and thirty, the time really was drawing near that he ought to produce an heir to the Duchy. With nothing but very distant male relations to inherit should anything happen to him, Rufus felt the sudden weight of responsibility.

After all, his own very fine father had been proud to have a son to whom he could pass the title which had been in their family for generations. To not produce an heir of his own would be to let his father down, Rufus was certain of it.

And, despite the fact that his own dear father had been dead for fifteen years now, still, he missed him greatly and wished to please him, even though he was not on the earth to see it.

“Henry, what you say makes a good deal of sense. I suppose it is time for me to let go of the notions which have hung around me for so many years. I have wasted too much time waiting for a woman of sense to come along, one who attracts me with wit and intelligence instead of fine gowns and over-made faces. After all, it has been many

years that I have searched for such a woman to no avail. Perhaps it is time to take the commonsense approach."

"And when it becomes known that you are looking for a bride, you will have your pick of all the county, Your Grace." Henry smiled, his ageing face crinkling pleasingly as he did so.

"The problem is, I have had the pick of the county ever since I became the Duke, and it has not helped me one bit. In all that time, I have not settled upon a woman who truly attracted me." He shrugged.

They both knew, of course, that *that* was not entirely true. The Duke of Hillington had been attracted once, very attracted, and he had been so scorched by the experience that he had spent many years after choosing not to repeat it.

"Ah, but you will be looking with very different criteria from here on in, will you not?"

"To be honest, Henry, I cannot begin to imagine what the criteria would be. What should I be looking for in a good match, in your opinion?" There was not another man on earth of whom Rufus would have asked so open a question, displaying such a great lack of knowledge of his own.

"Well, a good background, obviously."

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“A very solvent family.” Henry smiled. “By which I mean very wealthy.”

“Presumably you think that I should be insisting on a very healthy dowry.”

“Absolutely, Your Grace. The Duchy coffers are in good order, of course, but they are so because of many generations of good management and fine marriages. It may not speak to the last vestiges of romance in your soul, Your Grace, but these practicalities ensure the health and wealth of a fine estate like this for generations to come. As considerations go, it is of paramount importance.”

“Well, if you say so,” Rufus said without any conviction, even though he knew the old attorney spoke sense.

Henry Mercer had been an attorney for the Duchy for almost as long as he had been an attorney himself. He had been a young man when the old Duke had retained him as his attorney, long before Rufus himself was even born. Henry Mercer had been a feature in Rufus’ life, a very present figure, and a man who seemed as much a friend to his father as an attorney employed to see to Duchy matters.

Rufus' father had trusted Henry with everything, and Rufus realized that the time had come for him to lay yet one more matter in the ageing attorney's hands. The matter of his own matrimony. And, of course, it was not simply a matter of Rufus' marriage, but the very continuation of the Darnley line as Dukes of Hillington.

"So, what else are we looking for?" Rufus said, noting that he needed to move on with it all, to accept the cold practicalities of an arranged marriage.

"We need a sociable young lady, but not too sociable. Someone who will shine at your side at every event without overpowering it with her own personality."

"That seems like a lot to ask."

"Not really, again, it is just common sense. People must be pleased to be in your wife's company, for she will so often be expected to be with you wherever you go. To have a young lady of an agreeable nature is very important indeed, but it is equally important that she does not have so strong a character that *that* character itself is very obvious to all around."

"This is more complicated than I thought," Rufus said absently, all the while imagining his bride-to-be as a small, brightly coloured budgie, pretty to look at and pleasing to listen to as it chirped and tweeted,

but also easily silenced by simply throwing a black cloth over its cage.

He began to feel a little depressed by the notion.

“It is not so complicated, Your Grace. I suppose I am merely saying that you do not want a young lady who is too gregarious.”

“Oh, I suppose that makes sense,” Rufus conceded, wondering if it really did.

“And, I daresay, you might quite like her to be pretty.”

“Yes, I daresay,” Rufus said and smiled.

However, Rufus knew that beauty often changed into something else altogether when the personality became apparent. He had spent a good deal of time in the company of young ladies who were truly beautiful on first glance and, no more than an hour later, suddenly unattractive when some disagreeable part of their personality became known to him.

Rufus did not consider himself to be particularly discerning. He did not have a list of wants in a woman at all. All he had ever really wanted was a certain amount of truth and openness, combined with the sort of intelligence that made a young woman more interesting. Instead, he was often presented with young ladies of great beauty and

little else. Unless, of course, you counted their ambition as a quality.

And Rufus was so attuned to the idea of ambition that he very quickly spotted it in others. It was as if the more he looked for it, the more he found it, and yet he yearned for something else, for something completely different.

But, in the end, perhaps that was the lot of the man who held so high a title. Competition for his attention was generally fierce, and it was no doubt born of nothing more than ambition itself. Quite where he was supposed to meet a young woman who did not care about such things was a mystery to him. For surely such a woman, one who did not search for status, wealth, and title, would not seek him out in the first place. He felt as if he were trapped inside a great ball, being rolled down a hillside as his thoughts, the same old thoughts, tumbled all around him repeating themselves over and over again.

It was nothing new, nothing that had not existed for fifteen years or more. So, just thinking over old ground again would change nothing. Identifying the problem would not suddenly result in a solution. It was not as if by knowing that he did not want an ambitious young woman that suddenly an unambitious one would appear before him, for that had yet to happen.

“So, as you see, there is not really so much to it. I am sure that we will have identified just the right young lady for you in no time at all,”

Henry said when Rufus had not spoken for a while.

“And how are we to go about it all?”

“Well, I shall set a little gossip abroad that the Duke of Hillington has finally decided to look seriously for a wife.” Henry laughed. “And such gossip is, believe me, Your Grace, very easy to spread.”

“But once the gossip is out in the atmosphere, what are we to do next?”

“Well, I propose you hold the ball here, or something similar. A big event such as you have not held for a good, long while. It will attract a great deal of interest, I have no doubt, and you can invite a great many young ladies whom you might care to consider. From there, we shall have something of a list, I think. Or at least a very good idea of which young ladies you might wish to see again. And then, once we have narrowed it down, I think it would be prudent to spend a little time in the company of each of them before making your final decision.”

“You make it sound very much easier than I suspect it is.” Rufus laughed. “But that is not to say that I am not grateful to you, Henry, for I am. I must admit that this very question has been playing on my mind for some time, and it is a tremendous relief to me to have your help and guidance in it all.”

“Not at all, I am only too pleased to be of assistance.”

“So, how soon should I arrange the ball?”

“Oh, I think you may go ahead and begin to make preparations immediately, Your Grace. It will not take long for the entire county to be aware that you are actively seeking a bride. I can hardly think there will be a household untouched by that particular piece of information inside of a fortnight, and that is the truth.”

“I still cannot help thinking that there is something rather tawdry about all of this,” Rufus said and looked downcast.

“Your Grace, you must stand firm. You came to this conclusion for a reason, and I think you have come to this conclusion very well. I understand your misgivings, truly, for they are quite natural. But they are only the misgivings of any man when he is embarking on the quest for the perfect wife, I assure you. Marriages are made in this way every day of the week, Your Grace, and they almost always turn out for the best, do they not?”

“I suppose they do,” Rufus said, hearing the surprise in his voice as he thought of the myriad of marriages he had seen made in just such a way, marriages which ostensibly seemed to thrive.

And yet, despite all of that, Rufus still would have given almost anything to have crossed paths with a young woman with very different ideals. But, of course, he knew he was back inside the ball again, rolling down the hillside with yet another repetitive thought. He was not going to meet such a woman, not now, and he would do well to give up on the idea and get on with things.

“So, is it settled, Your Grace? Might I go ahead and propagate my little bit of gossip?” Henry looked amused, and Rufus was glad of it.

It had somehow taken the edge off his melancholy, and he was pleased to have Henry Mercer there with him. There was not another man with whom he would entrust such a task, and he knew it. He had known Henry Mercer all his life and, if anybody knew Rufus Darnley well enough to be able to find him a suitable bride, it was his father’s old attorney.

“Yes, you may go ahead and propagate your little bit of gossip.” Rufus laughed and felt a little lighter. The time had come for him to move along, and he knew it. He knew it well enough that the idea of it, the acceptance of it all, strangely gave him a little peace. “And I shall arrange a ball. In fact, I will speak with my housekeeper and butler today and start things moving.”

“Now that is the spirit, Your Grace. That is the spirit indeed.” Henry nodded his approval and rose from his chair on the opposite side of

the Duke's desk. "Now, I daresay I ought to get started on things myself."

"Yes, of course." Rufus nodded, releasing his attorney for the day. "And thank you, Henry. Really, I do appreciate it all."

Chapter 3

Ella sat alone in the immense drawing room of Dandridge Hall. Afternoon tea was not due to be served for another half an hour, but she had been keen to get herself settled and spend some time in quiet contemplation before the rigours of tea and company were upon her.

Ordinarily, Ella was not opposed to company at all, but the last few weeks had been a great trial to her, and she felt her spirits flagging daily.

Her mother had been right; Dandridge Hall was just about the most impressive sight Ella had ever seen. The drawing room was so large as to be impersonal, or at least Ella thought so, and she wished with all her heart that she and her mother had never left Longton Manor. The drawing room there was small, but not so small that they had not been able to receive a good many guests. And it was only really small in comparison with the one in which she now found herself.

For all its heavy oak paneling and impressive, immense portraits, it lacked something. The great curtains were made from a rich, golden velvet, the same velvet that all the couches were covered in. But there were so many couches, so many armchairs, and so many little side tables, that there really did seem to be too much of one colour. The room seemed to elaborately lack warmth of any kind.

Ella thought that it might have benefitted from having the occasional armchair picked out in a very deep blue. Then she reminded herself that she did not care anything about Dandridge Hall, not for its drawing room, its ballroom, and certainly not its occupants.

Why did she care about the somewhat ostentatious decoration of the drawing room when all she really wanted to do was go home again? But, of course, this *was* her home now. For all that she would ever sleep under the roof at Longton again, it might just as well not exist.

Just as she had predicted, the moment her mother had become the Countess of Dandridge, she had surrendered all rights to Longton Manor. And, worse still, she had surrendered those rights on Ella's behalf also.

In the end, it was that which finally broke Ella's heart. She had not been so very surprised when her mother had married, and even less so when it had occurred within days of Ariadne's period of mourning reaching its conclusion. She had even let go of the hurt of what she had known was the most dreadful slight to her father's memory.

But when she had it confirmed that the marriage had seen the transfer of all property rights fall into the hands of Ronald Belville, Ella had been beside herself. She had known all along that it would happen, it was the way of things after all. But still, it had hurt her to hear it out

loud, to know it for a fact. The home that had been her father's, that had been in her family for generation after generation, was now simply an adjunct to the great estate of Dandridge. It was nothing more than an outbuilding to the Earl, a man who owned so much and cared so little.

When Ella had cried at the news, just days after the wedding, Ronald Bellville had just studied her with open contempt. It was clear that he had no concept of the attachment a person could form to their family home and all the memories trapped within it. And it was equally clear to her that her own mother had no concept of that attachment either, providing yet further proof that mother and daughter had very little in common.

"You are very early to tea, my dear." Her mother appeared as if she had been pulled right out of Ella's thoughts.

"As are you," Ella said slowly. "Why *are* you here so early, Mama?"

"I just want to make sure that all is well with the room before our company arrives." And it was clear that she had come to do just that as she cast a critical eye around the place, ready to find some little fault with it, something that she could berate the staff for to satisfy her own need for that little bit of power.

"There is never a thing out of place in this room, Mama. I should think

the staff never dare to put a foot wrong for so scornful a master."

"Ella, you must not speak in such a way," Ariadne hissed at her. "You must not speak of your stepfather like that."

"He is by no means my father, step or otherwise. He is simply the Earl of Dandridge and your husband, Mama. He is no relation of mine, and neither are his dreadful daughters."

"Really, I must beg you to stop this immediately." Ariadne looked suddenly desperate and began to look over her shoulder towards the door.

"Just three weeks, and already you are afraid of him, Mama. How much you must regret this hasty marriage of yours." Ella could not help it, she wanted to say something hurtful.

Her mother had pulled the rug from beneath her feet, the rug that had been her life. Yes, its delicate weaving had been tugged dramatically when her dear father had died, but her mother had seen its complete removal when she had denied Ella her childhood home as well.

And, despite every protest, Ariadne had gone ahead with it all. She wanted to be the Countess of Dandridge, and nothing would stop her, not even her daughter's broken heart. If she was starting to pay the price for it all, then so be it.

“I am not afraid of him, Ella. Really, what a ridiculous thing to say. But you should be a little more grateful to him than you are, and it certainly will not make for a comfortable existence if he overhears you talking about him in so derogatory a fashion. And, whatever you care to say, he is your stepfather. I have married him now, and he is my husband, and you will simply have to accept it. There is nothing you can do about any of it, so try to make the best of it instead of making things difficult,” Ariadne hissed furiously. “And as for Patience and Georgiana, they are not awful. They are perfectly pleasant, very accomplished young ladies; I think you could learn a good deal from them.”

“There is nothing about those two young ladies I would care to emulate, Mama. And I can assure you that I have absolutely nothing to learn from them, except how *not* to behave.”

“You have not even tried to ingratiate yourself to them.”

“Why should I *ingratiate* myself to them, Mama? I am supposed to be a member of the family, am I not? I am not a household servant, after all.”

“No, but this is their home, and you should be very aware of that fact.”

“Is it not my home too? Did you not tell me that Dandridge Hall, once my beloved Longton Manor was stripped from me, would be my home, and a very fine one?”

“I cannot speak to you when you are behaving in such an obtuse manner. But I will insist you behave yourself from here on in. The Earl and his daughters will be here at any moment, ready to receive the Earl of Maybridge.”

“Oh yes, the Earl of Maybridge,” Ella said with a scornful laugh. “What fun it will be to watch Patience and Georgiana vying for his attention like two peacocks strutting up and down a well-manicured lawn.”

“Ella!” Ariadne advanced upon her daughter so quickly that Ella thought she might actually strike her. “You will stop this immediately.”

“I will never forgive you for what you have done, Mama,” Ella said and felt suddenly beaten by it all.

There had never been a need for them to leave their home; there had never been a lack of security. They had everything they wanted, but it would never have been enough. Her own mother had smashed her life to pieces just to satisfy her need to feel like anything but the down-trodden governess she had once been.

Where once Ella had had pity for her mother, now she had nothing but contempt. Surely, there came a time when a person could not blame the past for how they behaved in the present. And, as far as Ella was concerned, that time had long passed for her mother.

“I hear footsteps, so take your seat,” Ariadne said sharply.

Ella took her seat, knowing that she had no other option. She felt as if she had been dropped into the territory of the enemy, a family of people she did not know and whom, thus far, seemed not to like her very much at all. And now her mother, far from looking out for her own daughter’s needs or happiness in any way, had joined their ranks, ready to throw scorn on her if she did anything to upset the precarious nest she had feathered for herself.

How lonely she felt all of a sudden.

“Well, we shall just have to wait and see which of us he prefers,” Georgiana said loudly as the two young women stormed into the drawing room.

“I am the oldest, Georgiana, and you will respect that. It is for me to find a husband first and not you,” Patience said angrily.

“I cannot help it if I am the prettiest,” Georgiana retorted spitefully.

“You are not the prettiest at all,” Patience snapped back. “You are very far from being pretty, Georgiana. In truth, I pity you, you are so ill-favoured.”

As the sisters settled themselves down side-by-side on one of the couches, ignoring Ella completely, she wondered if they would even notice if the Earl of Maybridge himself walked in at that moment. Or would they continue to argue amongst themselves, saying such nasty things to one another in the heat of their tawdry little competition?

They continued to argue about who was the prettiest, and Ella studied them coolly, thinking that there was very little to choose between them. At one and twenty, Patience Bellville was the oldest, with Georgiana at just nineteen. But they both had the same pale blonde hair, very pretty in its own way, but largely used to detract from features that were just a little too large. Both girls had wide mouths, which looked attractive as long as they did not smile too broadly. Their noses were a little thick, and each woman sported a little gap between her front teeth that, in faces much more demure, would have been sweetly attractive. But the girls’ bullish nature seemed somehow to show in their faces and, although they were very well turned out and attractive on account of it, neither one of them was truly beautiful.

The young and handsome Earl of Maybridge arrived in the room at

the same time as his host, the two men talking animatedly as they walked in.

“And your mother as well, I take it?” Ronald Bellville was almost convincing; to the casual observer, it would sound as if he truly cared about the old Countess of Maybridge.

“She is as well as can be expected, Ronald. Her health is failing, but not so much that she does not get about anymore.” The Earl of Maybridge seemed to Ella to be a very bright, jaunty sort of a young man.

He spoke with a smile at all times and even sometimes something of a laugh in his voice. He seemed very jovial, even when the Bellville sisters began to aggressively vie for his attention.

“Lord Maybridge, are you to hold a ball soon and at Maybridge Hall?” Georgiana said, and it was clear from his expression that he had not thought of such a thing.

“Yes, when is it to be?” Patience was not one to be denied. “I am very much looking forward to it.”

“My dear ladies, I had not thought to hold a ball at all this year,” Lord Maybridge said and gave a self-deprecating shrug.

“Oh, but that is a dreadful shame. I do so love to dance, but it seems to me that there are very few young men who dance particularly well. But I hear that you *do* dance very well, Lord Maybridge.” Georgiana, despite being the younger of the sisters, seemed somehow a little more practiced in the art of flattering the male ego.

“Well, I like to dance too. And the truth is, I like very little else but dancing. I live to dance, Lord Maybridge.” Patience’s retort sounded just a little desperate.

As the sisters continued to argue in the same vein, using the Earl of Maybridge as some kind of proxy, Ella found herself curiously fascinated by it all. She had never had a sister herself, but was sure that if she did, she would treat her with a good deal more respect. She would have loved to have had a sister of her own, someone in whom she could confide, someone to take the edge off the loneliness. What dreadful women these were that they could take one another for granted in such a way, so ready to dig holes beneath one another just to get their own way.

“And what about you, Miss Winfield?” The Earl of Maybridge turned to her so suddenly that her mouth dropped open a little. “Do you care very much for dancing?”

“Yes, I do like to dance, Lord Maybridge, when I have the chance of it,” she answered in a very simple way, hoping that all present would

see that she was in no way in competition with the arguing sisters.

She truly did not care who got to dance with Lord Maybridge or whether or not he even laid on a ball in the first place. It was immaterial to her life, and she wished that she could escape the drawing room and find something more interesting to do.

And yet, there was something curiously fascinating about the little performance that was going on in front of her. As she watched them all, it was as if everybody was playing a part in a theatrical.

Ronald Bellville was pretending to be a good-natured Earl entertaining his neighbour purely for the pleasure of it, rather than trying to peddle away one of his dreadful daughters to the unsuspecting man.

And her mother, sitting straight-backed and very pleased with herself, was pretending to have been born to such a position, a Countess through and through, not a woman who had ever been reduced to the status of a governess, that was for certain.

And then there were the sisters, Patience and Georgiana. Both of them were pretending to be demure young ladies, not the competitive little dragons they were; bullish little creatures who wanted the poor man to hold the ball simply so they could discover which of them would get to dance with him the most. Anything to satisfy their rivalry.

As distasteful as it all was, it really was fascinating. Fascinating enough, perhaps, that it would divert Ella's attention from her own sadness for a little while. Yes, she would make a study of them all, as if they were simply mice in a cage and not real people.

She amused herself in such a fashion until the dreadful afternoon tea was over and the poor, beleaguered Earl of Maybridge was finally released.

As the family made their way to the door to wave him off, Ella stayed behind in the drawing room and peered unseen out of the window to watch him depart. As the coach came past, she saw the look on his face, a look that would not have been visible to the family on the great stone steps at the front of the hall.

Ella laughed out loud to see that the Earl of Maybridge looked exhausted and relieved all at once. She thought it very unlikely that the poor young man would lay on a ball at all. In truth, he probably would not lay on another ball for a good many years, or at least he would wait until he had confirmation that the two blonde-haired peacocks had found suitable husbands and were safely married away.

"What are you laughing at? I suggest you pull yourself together, young lady, for your stepfather is furious, and he is on his way," Ariadne said, scurrying into the room ahead of her husband. "And you had better listen to what he says and say nothing in response unless he

tells you to."

Suddenly, Ella felt afraid. What on earth had she done to produce such a highly excited state within her mother and, apparently, great wrath in the Earl of Dandridge.

"Well, what was all that?" the Earl said immediately he burst into the room.

"I do not understand your meaning, sir," Ella said truthfully.

"I do not believe that for a minute," he said and snorted loudly as he slammed the door closed.

Well, if nothing else, at least the dreadful step-sisters were not going to witness whatever humiliation was about to come Ella's way.

Judging it best not to say anything at all, Ella simply looked at the Earl until he spoke again.

"You ought not to have interfered this afternoon, young lady. I have a duty to find fine husbands for my daughters, and I will not have you trying to steal young men away from under their noses."

"But sir, I would seek to do no such thing."

“Silence!” he bellowed so loudly and so suddenly that both Ella and her mother jumped in unison.

Ella knew that she had done nothing to incur his wrath. And she knew equally what had caused his anger, even though she would never dare say it.

Without any prompting whatsoever, the Earl of Maybridge had favoured *her* over Patience and Georgiana. But she had not invited it at all. She had said nothing and had been as surprised as anybody else that he had continually turned to her to draw her into the conversation.

But she had not put any pressure on him at all; she had not demanded a ball or tried to gain his attention in any way, and he was, without a doubt, grateful for the respite that such behaviour afforded him, especially in the midst of two such determined young ladies.

If anything, Patience and Georgiana might do well to temper their gregarious natures. And she had no doubt that the Earl knew it very well, very well indeed. And it was that failing in his own family, in his own teachings as a father, which had made him so explosively angry.

“You will not behave in such a fashion again under my roof, do you understand?” he said in a voice which was very much quieter and yet somehow more dangerous.

“Yes,” Ella said simply, feeling the pure frustration at having to openly agree with something she did not agree with at all out of fear and fear alone.

She was being bullied, intimidated, and she could not bear it. He really was every bit the pig that the entire county proclaimed him to be. Everything she had warned her mother about was coming to pass, and Ella could hardly think which one of the two of them she despised the most.

Without another word, the Earl slammed out of the room, leaving Ella and her mother alone.

“Now see what you have caused, Ella. I think he is as angry with me as he is with you, but it is not my doing,” Ariadne complained like a child.

“And it is not my doing, Mama.” Ella spat the words angrily. “He has raised his daughters to be as forceful as untrained horses. If a young man of the county shies away from such young ladies, it is hardly my doing. You know very well, Mother, that I did not interfere in their meeting. I sat as quietly as manners would allow me to sit, and you know it. It is only your husband’s anger that the man was not interested in his own daughters that has brought this on, not anything that I have done.”

“Ella, you really must try to see things differently.”

“Differently? You have just blamed me for something I have not done. And then you have complained for your own sake. That you would dare to do so after the way you have treated me is quite astonishing. We are only here in this dreadful house at your behest, Mama, not mine. I did not force you to marry a bully with ugly, ill-behaved daughters. You made that decision on your own and, in doing so, you dragged me here against my will. I will not hear your complaints.”

“And you will not speak to me like that again.” Ariadne had clearly recovered from her husband’s outburst.

“Ah, you seek to bully me as your husband does.”

“I do not bully you, child. But you must see that it is very important to show Patience and Georgiana in their best light. After all, they are young ladies, and it is important for us to find suitable husbands for them,” Ariadne spoke as if she were giving a genuinely sensible explanation.

“What about me, Mama? Or have you taken the daughters of the Earl to your heart as quickly as you took the Earl himself?”

“I will not hear any more of this,” Ariadne said, and Ella knew that

the argument was about to be drawn to an abrupt close simply because her mother did not know how to continue in it.

At least some things never changed, she supposed.

“As you wish,” Ella said and turned from her to walk back across the drawing room.

“Just see that you do not interfere again, or I am sure that you will be all the sorrier for it,” her mother snapped and then strode out of the room.

Ella had never felt more alone in her life. She had never felt close to her mother, but Ariadne was all that she had in the world, and to find herself losing her too, even though the woman provided very little comfort in any circumstance, upset her more than she could ever have imagined.

As she stared blindly out across the immaculate and immense lawns of the Dandridge estate, tears rolled hot and relentless down her pale cheeks.

Chapter 4

It was a cool autumn afternoon, and despite the weak sunshine, Rufus Darnley knew that night would very quickly draw in. Still, he was not yet ready to return indoors, enjoying the cool air on his skin and the crunch of the leaves underneath his well-worn old brown boots.

Rufus had been out for a ride after luncheon but, on returning, found that it had not been quite as fortifying as he had hoped. The same old thoughts whirled around and around in his mind and, by the time his horse had been stabled again, he felt more listless than he had before he had gone out.

Since he was already well wrapped against the cold, the Duke decided to take a very good turn around his grounds. He had walked down the great gravel driveway some distance before turning in to walk through the woodland for a while.

He continued to crunch through leaves, enjoying the distraction of the sound which seemed capable of holding his attention in the present instead of allowing him to drift to thoughts of the past. As he walked, Rufus concentrated on the noise, fighting against any little thought that tried to break through his consciousness.

But, of course, he was unable to sustain it for long. Within a matter of

minutes, he felt as if he was back on the old track, trapped inside the ball, rolling downhill.

Even though he had made his decision, and made it firmly, that he would now find a wife no matter what, there was no comfort in that decision at all. Rufus had found that there was at first. It was the relief of resignation, in the beginning, a kind of defeated, silent sigh.

But that feeling had very quickly worn off and been replaced with dreadful visions of the future in which he found himself forever tied to a woman of great beauty and little character. And, worse still, he turned to thoughts of the past, thoughts of the one woman who had seemed to turn him away from all the others for many years.

Eleanor Camden had been the first and only woman that Rufus Darnley had ever fallen in love with. She had been bright and funny and, without a shadow of a doubt, just about the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life.

Rufus had just reached his twentieth year, and his beloved father's failing health was a constant source of concern to him. But, as sick as his father was at times, Rufus had never really contemplated the idea that he might die sooner rather than later. He had assumed that his father would go on and on, that he would battle the sickness and defeat it, going on to see many more years in his role as the Duke of Hillington.

When he had met Eleanor Camden at an afternoon event held by an old aunt of his, now long dead, Rufus had been instantly attracted. Eleanor Camden had paid him so much attention that his young man's ego was almost overwhelmed. And she was so amusing and bright that his heart was won almost immediately.

Rufus had courted her for many months, much to the pleasure of both her father and his own. She very quickly became a regular visitor to Hillington Hall, and he had fully imagined her there in the future as his wife, both of them happy and fulfilled, satisfied with everything that life had thrown at them so easily.

Before they had been acquainted even six months, Rufus had already decided that he would marry her. He waited until the six months of their courtship was complete, however, before deciding that he would, indeed, ask for her hand in marriage.

Despite the fact that he was sure that she would respond favourably to such a proposal, the very thought of making it had filled him with a sort of nervous energy for days on end. He kept imagining the whole thing, planning it out in his head and wondering when he might get his opportunity to actually ask her.

And he had been pondering just such a thing at a bridge afternoon in the home of one of Eleanor's friends when he overheard a little

conversation between the two young women.

He had just finished his game of bridge and had gone in search of Eleanor, never tiring of her wonderful company. It had been an extraordinarily warm summer and that day when they had all played bridge had been no different.

Thinking that the two young women had likely gone outside for some air, the young Rufus decided that he would follow.

He had walked around the side of the house, making his way to the terrace, when he finally heard two feminine voices. Judging it quite rightly to be Eleanor and her friend, he continued in their direction. But, just as he had been about to round the corner of the house and announce himself, something in the tone of the conversation stopped him and, instead of making his presence known, he paused for a moment to listen.

“I really do think that Lord Darnley is all set to ask for your hand in marriage, my dear,” the young woman said excitedly.

“Yes, I do believe you are right.” Eleanor sounded excited herself and Rufus, his ego satisfied that his proposal when he finally made it, would receive a favourable response, smiled to himself.

“And he is a very handsome young man, is he not?” her friend went

on.

“He is pleasant enough to look at, I daresay,” Eleanor said in a strangely airy tone. It was a tone that Rufus Darnley had never heard before, and it brought him up short. “But he is perhaps a little dark for my taste. He has a very intense look about him at times, with such black hair and such dark eyes. I do so like a young man to be blonde and to have blue eyes.” She sounded a little far off and dreamy, and he wondered what was going on.

Surely, she did not have somebody else in mind that she preferred to him? After all, she had sounded so excited by the prospect that he might propose. Rufus was greatly confused. So confused, in fact, that he chose to linger just a little longer before announcing his presence.

“Oh, dear me, you are not still keen on Lord Brightwell, are you?” The young woman laughed girlishly.

“No, I should not wish to marry him, even though he is an Earl with a very fine and handsome face.” Eleanor laughed too, but it was a very much more cynical sound. “Not now, at any rate, when I have a Duke in the making.”

“Yes, but he is still *in the making*. He is not Duke yet, is he?” As the young woman spoke, Rufus frowned deeply.

“I think it is true to say that it is only a matter of time. The old Duke’s health fails day by day, and I think that Rufus will be the Duke of Hillington soon enough.” There was something in her tone, something greedy and foul that he had never heard before.

Rufus felt his mouth go dry as anger surged through him. He could hardly believe it, but Eleanor sounded as if she would welcome the death of his dear father. But how could this be so?

“And then you will be Duchess, my dear,” the young woman said.

“Yes, and then I will be the Duchess of Hillington. Just imagine that,” she said and laughed.

“Yes. All you have to do now is wait for the inevitable proposal.”

“And I look forward to it greatly,” Eleanor said.

Rufus had not waited to hear any more. As far as he was concerned, he had heard enough. He had thought that he had known Eleanor, known her heart and her mind as surely as he knew his own. But as he had listened, an eavesdropper standing silently just a few feet away, he realized that he had never known her at all.

Everything that he had assumed to be open and honest between them he could now see was anything but. She had not fallen for him with

his dark hair and eyes, his olive skin. She had not fallen for his wit or humour, or his interesting conversation. She was simply seeking to make herself a Duchess and was so intent that she longed for the death of a man who had never done her any harm. Rufus had never felt so betrayed in all his life, and it had taken a great effort of will for him not to walk around the corner and tell her as much.

But, he knew that his father would not approve of giving in to such instincts. It was better to walk away from it all, to slowly turn his back on the woman without explanation and never, ever renew his addresses to her.

Rufus realized that he had been marching hastily through the woodland, fueled by the old anger and resentment which had overcome him as he relived that dreadful, overheard conversation. He had made his way deeper into the woodland and, just as he had earlier predicted, darkness was already beginning to draw down. The weak sunshine seemed to have disappeared without warning, although he knew that could not possibly be true.

Rufus had been trapped in his own thoughts, the same wheel of remembered conversations and feelings that he seemed to have been stuck on for so many years.

As he turned and trudged back out towards the gravel driveway, judging it to be his safest route home in the fading light, Rufus knew

that he had made his decision on that day so many years before that he would never entertain ambitious young ladies again. He had made it his business to study them, to know them for what they were and to see them coming at every turn. He had been firm in his resolve never to find himself so used in the future.

But now, as he marched along through the cold and damp of early evening, he realized that he was doing nothing more than instigating a competition between just so many women of that type. Surely any young lady who crossed his path now, if Henry Mercer had done his job and propagated his gossip as he had promised, would be cut from the very same cloth that the young Eleanor Camden had been.

Rufus let out a deep groan and watched with familiar fascination as his warm breath condensed in the cold air, creating a great misty plume around him.

Suddenly a thought struck him, a thought that was not necessarily one which would induce happiness, but one which gave him a certain amount of satisfaction, at any rate.

Things would be different this time, even if the young ladies presented to him were no more honest and real than Eleanor Camden had been. And the reason that things would be different this time would be because he would determinedly keep himself distant from whichever woman he finally married. He would not fall in love with her the way

he had with Eleanor Camden. He would not make himself so vulnerable to it all again. After all, if he did not love the woman, what would it matter if she was choosing to marry him for nothing more than the title? It would surely be neither here nor there to him as long as she was a good mother to their children.

The Duke laughed to himself without any hint of real mirth as he strode back towards the myriad of lighted windows of Hillington Hall. All he really needed was a wife with whom to produce an heir, and that was it. He need not love her, nor ever find himself in a position to be hurt by her true opinions of him. Her opinions of him would never be sought, and they would not matter to him anyway.

Rufus realized that he was becoming a very different sort of man, one he was not at all sure he liked. But if that was what it took to go through with his plan, to sire an heir to the estate and title his fine father had left him, then that was what he would do.

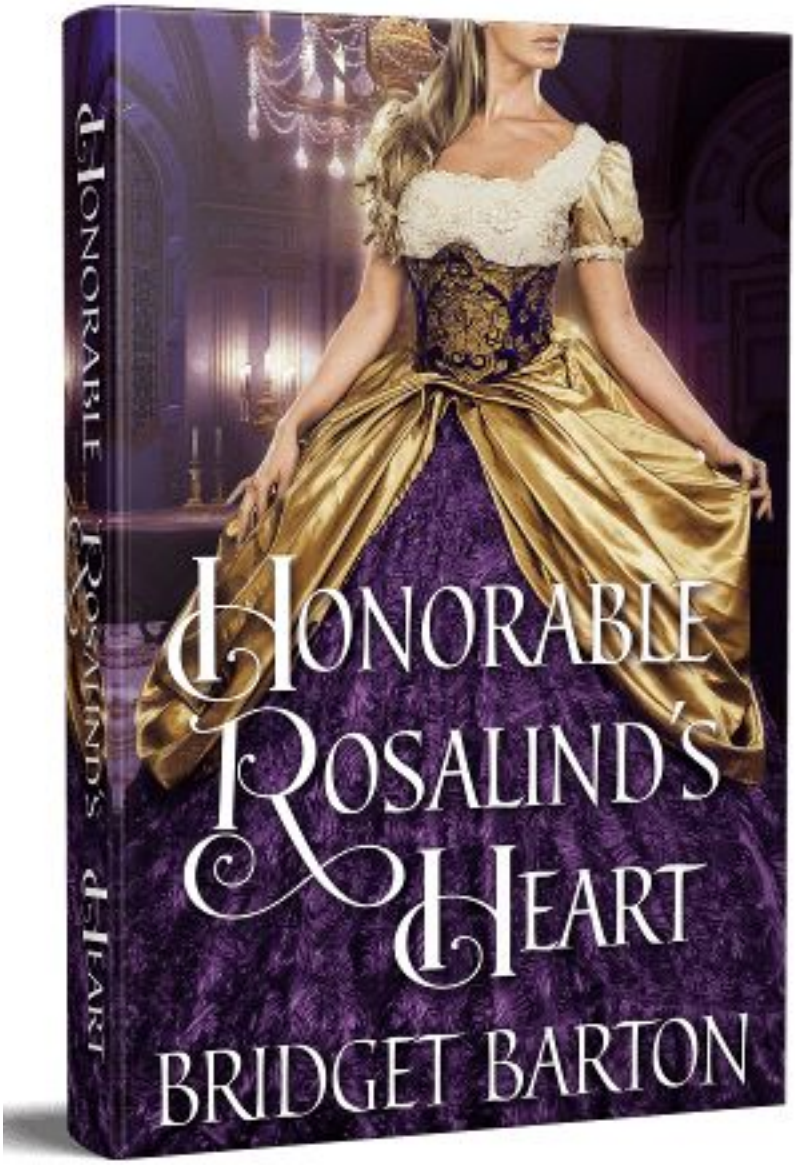
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